

The Roebuck Motion and the Issue of British Recognition of the Confederate States of America

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With the secession of the southern states from the Union and the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, British policymakers and financiers had to contend with the novel diplomatic and economic difficulties of relations with two Americas locked in battle. Faced with an uncertain contest abroad and divided affinities at home, the government of Lord Palmerston chose to steer a middle course of neutrality. This did not, however, prevent advocates and detractors of both sides from organizing opinion and advancing agendas across the country and even into Parliament. Debate on the situation within the warring states and suggestions that Britain might do well to extend formal diplomatic recognition to the Confederate States of America as a sovereign nation, or to intervene in the conflict, appeared regularly in Parliament during the course of the war. The ill-fated Parliamentary motion towards recognition introduced in summer of 1863 by John Arthur Roebuck, Member of Parliament for Sheffield, was the last of the serious attempts to secure recognition. It was, perhaps, the most telling effort of the entire war period in terms of the European diplomatic landscape and Europe's relations to events in North America.

Between the inception of Roebuck's motion in May 1863 and its withdrawal on 13 July 1863, its sponsor engaged in amateur diplomacy with the French, serious breaches of protocol, and eventually witnessed not only the obloquy of pro-Union and anti-interventionist speakers but also the desertion of other pro-Confederate members of Parliament. His own rhetoric was primarily to blame, for Roebuck created a situation where the motion's failure would force the Palmerston government into closing the door on recognition of the Confederacy.

Howard Jones's 1992 *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in*

the Civil War has generally been recognized as the latest authority on the subject of British recognition and intervention issues in the Civil War. However, Jones's work implies that the threat of foreign intervention had dissipated after November of 1862, even though Jones himself notes that the British Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, still held out the prospect that the Confederacy might be recognized in 1863. Certainly the South still found sympathetic ears in powerful positions the secretary of state for foreign affairs, Lord John Russell, and the prime minister among them but they had been dissuaded from endorsing intervention. Such a conclusion, however, discards the possibility that Russell or Palmerston might have been brought around by Confederate victories or convincing agitation from textile makers reeling from cotton shortages in Lancashire and idle workers unable to make a living wage as a result. In 1863 such a possibility seemed very real, and the Roebuck motion reflects this reality just as surely as its failure reflects the inability to convince the ministers.¹

The motion introduced by Roebuck in mid-summer of 1863 thus deserves a fresh look. Jones, for example, limits his mention of the motion to a few sentences and an extensive footnote; with respect to Britain, the motion itself has been touched upon only tangentially since D.P. Crook's 1974 *The North, The South, and the Powers* and Brian Jenkins's 1980 *Britain and the War for Union* (and even those spend a scant few pages upon it). Both limit their examinations to the motion as an episode, but make important points. Crook notes that Roebuck's motion held a great deal of promise for success before it became a fiasco, and Jenkins identifies the watershed nature of Roebuck's failure. After Roebuck's motion for recognition failed, it was apparent that recognition from the major European powers would not be forthcoming so long at the war's outcome was contested. It is in the confirmation of this fact that Roebuck's motion is important.²

I.

Queen Victoria, in 1861, declared Great Britain formally neutral in the Civil War, implying legally that a state of war existed between the United States and the Confederacy. The British Government further infuriated the Lincoln Administration by granting "belligerent rights" to the Confederacy, a course of action announced by the Queen on 13 May 1861, within the context of the aforementioned declaration of neutrality. The extension of belligerent rights, extended only when two organized sides are seen in a conflict,

was prompted by Lincoln's declaration of a blockade of Southern ports in accordance with international law in mid-1861. Therefore, Anglo-American relations were strained by this implication that the South was equal in status to the Union as a military force, rather than a rebellious faction. From that point, the Palmerston government kept a neutral stance, walking a fine line between the two sides.³

The Confederacy, for its part, sent several delegations to Europe with the intent of securing recognition of the Confederate States as a nation. Diplomatic recognition is in itself a symbolic act, but its repercussions are enormous. In granting diplomatic recognition to a government, a neutral state accepts and tacitly approves of its existence. The problem with Britain's granting this recognition to the Confederate States of America, however, centers upon British relations with the United States. The Lincoln administration's stated objective was the restoration of the Union a goal necessarily incompatible with the existence of the Confederacy as a sovereign nation. Recognition, therefore, portended war between Britain and the United States, much as French recognition of the United States during the Revolutionary War led to war between France and Britain.

The calculus of the recognition issue was not solely on the negative side. Recognition also had the potential to confront Lincoln with a *fait accompli* and end the war, and its supporters long considered this the strongest argument in favor. Likewise, recognition might lead to a British declaration of the Union blockade as ineffective, and the Royal Navy could then open southern ports by force; hitherto the blockade and closed ports had been respected as part of an internal matter of the United States. Finally, whether or not recognition led to war, the division of the United States was sometimes argued as desirable for maintaining the balance of power between European nations and the growing economic might of the United States. In all of those cases, the Confederacy could remain a source of cheap raw materials for the textile mills and factories of Europe. The Confederate commissioners and their sympathizers used all of these arguments, sometimes in combination, to plead their case. The issue of continued slavery in the South was conveniently omitted, a lacuna that would return to haunt Roebuck's motion in 1863. But to fully understand the situation and why slavery was not the pivotal issue it might appear, one must realize that until late 1863 recognition was considered by many not a matter of if but of when, and the independence of the Confederacy seemed assured in any case. Indeed, to English observers, slavery was not the issue in the war; it became a diplomatically more prominent

issue following Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which provided Union supporters with "proof" of the North's superior moral cause.⁴

Superior as a moral cause might be, feats of arms dictated the actions of pro-Confederate members of Parliament. The amount of support for recognition varied heavily depending upon Confederate military fortunes; for example, As Robert E. Lee's Army of Virginia moved north and began a second invasion of Pennsylvania in mid-1863, friends of the Confederacy gathered support for a new consideration of recognition for the Confederate States of America.

John Arthur Roebuck was one such friend of the Confederate States. A member of Parliament representing Sheffield since 1849, Roebuck had begun his career in Commons as a Radical, representing Bath from 1833 to 1847. Roebuck held an aggressive stance in foreign policy, having authored many pamphlets and articles on colonial and diplomatic matters, and his attacks on British conduct in the Crimean War were largely responsible the resignation of Lord Aberdeen's Ministry in 1855. He was also a very caustic and often brutally frank fellow, and his "directness of attack and pungency of speech" landed him in more than one duel in his earlier parliamentary days.⁵

William Schaw Lindsay, a British shipbuilder, owner, and member of Parliament for Sunderland, was another agitator in favor of the Confederacy. In mercantile matters, he was well-regarded, and had received audiences with the French Emperor on multiple occasions on navigation issues. Lindsay took part in the birthing of Roebuck's motion when he invited James Mason, Confederate commissioner to Great Britain, and Roebuck to his estate in late May 1863. During the meeting, Roebuck and Lindsay decided the time was right to take action. Afterwards, Lindsay would be inextricably bound to the motion, using his capacities, both official and unofficial, to aid Roebuck and his cause.⁶

This motion was not the first action in Parliament to consider the question of recognition, nor was it the first time the Palmerston ministry had considered the subject. Many friends of the South precipitated discussion of the subject in Parliament at various times. These discussions had heretofore ended without tangible results. Correspondence from Prime Minister Palmerston to his Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord John Russell, reflect the former's conviction that without the great powers of Europe, Britain could not possibly act on this issue of recognition without dire consequences. As a result, the Palmerston government followed a "wait-and-see" approach, requiring a major victory by the South before extending recogni-

tion.⁷

Roebuck felt that British opinion at this time was favorable to his motion. In addition to recent Confederate victories, including Chancellorsville in May, there was a perceived willingness of France to follow Great Britain's lead on matters concerning the American war. Roebuck thus needed only worry about opposition in Parliament standing in the way of recognition. Pro-Confederate groups, to this end, organized meetings designed to solicit sympathy from the industrial workers. At the same time, Roebuck himself organized meetings in Sheffield to garner support for his motion, the presentation of which was scheduled for 30 June.⁸

However, anti-recognition forces were also gearing up for Roebuck. From another member of Parliament, Roebuck heard of a rumor that may have originated from Palmerston himself. This rumor implied that Palmerston would, in the course of debate, oppose recognition as inexpedient. He would support his opposition with the statement that Napoleon III had reversed his earlier position and no longer supported the idea of meddling in American affairs, with or without Great Britain. Roebuck communicated this discovery in a letter to Lindsay, and they came to the realization that the only way to counter the possibility of Palmerston's undercutting them was to travel to Paris immediately and speak with the Emperor themselves.⁹

II

Roebuck and Lindsay met with Napoleon III on 22 June 1863, only eight days before the initial discussion of the motion before Parliament. There, Roebuck was notified by Napoleon that France was ready to support recognition if Britain should decide on that course. Napoleon, however, refused Roebuck's request for an official statement of his position, fearing that Lord Russell would forward any such communication to U.S. Secretary of State Seward in Washington. Napoleon III feared a war, which would jeopardize his position in Mexico and quite possibly destroy his fleet. Roebuck replied to Napoleon that the Union would not declare war, but even if they followed such a course, France would need not fear. The federal navy was weak, and the people fatigued; Roebuck believed that the people of both Union and Confederacy would hail Napoleon as a savior. Napoleon was also informed of the existence of "peace parties" in the North, and Roebuck's belief that their existence was an indicator of popular sentiment.¹⁰

Before leaving their audience with Napoleon, Roebuck brought up a question which would later cause much embarrassment to himself, Lindsay, and

the Palmerston government. Roebuck was denied any written statement of the Emperor's position, arising from Napoleon's fear of having such a communiqué forwarded by Russell to the United States Department of State, which the Emperor alleged happened before. Roebuck therefore asked if he could have the Emperor's permission to relay verbally, to Parliament, all that was communicated in the meeting. The Emperor tendered an affirmative answer. This information coming from Napoleon contradicted the position Palmerston was intending to present in Parliament, that France was not in communication with Great Britain on the subject of Confederate recognition, and therefore was not in favor of recognition at that time. According to Lindsay's written account of the meeting, Napoleon expressed surprise that "Lord Palmerston gave that answer, for you know, Mr. Lindsay, it was not correct."¹¹ Feeling secure in this knowledge, Roebuck was prepared to return to Parliament and present his motion before Commons.¹²

This first day of the debate ultimately consisted of five major groupings of arguments. The first grouping was one that contained only Roebuck, for this was Roebuck's own presentation, designed to justify his position. The second grouping, perhaps the most immediately damaging to Roebuck, was made up of friends of the Confederacy who were against recognition. The third segment, which was divided into several spots during this part of the debate, was the position of government ministers who partook. The fourth, and most virulently opposed, viewpoint comes from the pro-Union factions. They were also not sequential in the debate, but attacked Roebuck's motion at several different times. The last group, which included only Lord Robert Arthur Talbot Cecil, member for Stamford and a future Prime Minister himself, was the pro-recognition group providing support on the floor for Roebuck. Oddly enough, William Lindsay did not address Commons in the course of the debate on the 30th. Although he was addressed, and even rose from his seat on one occasion, he declined to comment.¹³

The debate drifted as well. It can be divided, therefore, into two major parts: one that was the intended subject, the motion itself; the second was the subject upon which debate turned at the end, the question of Roebuck's allegations concerning France. The first portion was the longest, as the speeches were of greater duration, but the second appears to be impromptu and is therefore shorter in the total length of transcribed material. The second subject was undoubtedly the cause of questions that were later brought up in Commons. At the beginning of the debate, however, Roebuck felt he had the Napoleonic trump card to play against the machinations of Palmerston.¹⁴

Roebuck was therefore confident in his intent to present his motion before Parliament; however, immediately prior to his presentation on 30 June a different but related question was placed before Commons. This was a question posed by William E. Forster to the Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Sir Austen Henry Layard, concerning the position of France. Forster asked Layard if the government had received any communiqués from France concerning intervention or mediation in the Civil War. In his answer to the question, Layard took great care to clearly indicate that no such communiqué came from France dealing with any issue of that sort, including recognition. Forster's purpose of bringing this question to the floor at the time was clearly to acquaint the members with the 'official' position of the French, with a mind to discredit Roebuck's meeting with Napoleon before it was brought to Parliament's attention. Similar measures were carried out in the House of Lords on the 26th and 30th of June.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Roebuck brought his motion to the floor for debate shortly after Forster's question, preceding it with a short background speech. In this monologue, Roebuck stated that the decision of the American colonies to revolt against Britain in the eighteenth century and French recognition of those colonies as independent before Britain did so were the foundation of two points of international law. These precedents, said Roebuck, justified the actions of the Confederacy and merited recognition of their independence. The North, Roebuck continued, was responsible for exploitation and repression of the Southern states, forcing them into armed insurrection. Slavery, Roebuck asserted, constituted an economic device aimed at easing this repression, and when it failed, the South seceded. Slavery was not a question in the war, it was wholly caused by economic reasons. The apparent Northern inability to crush the rebellion was portrayed as proof of the righteousness of the Confederate cause.¹⁶

From this point, Roebuck ventured to appeal to national pride and public feeling. He showed a strong anti-American bias, saying flatly that he wished to see no reconstitution of the Union. Perhaps more important, however, was the portion of his speech which pertained to the position Napoleon III allegedly communicated to him in the meeting June 22. Napoleon, Roebuck carefully stated, had given him free rein to relate all of the details of the meeting to the House of Commons, which he cheerfully did, using strong language imploring Great Britain to take the initiative, lest France reap all the benefits of recognition. Great Britain need not concern itself with the threat of war with the Union, said Roebuck, for Great Britain could decimate any

opposing force the North could assemble.¹⁷

Before regaining his seat, Roebuck presented his motion, which requested:

That a humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that She will be graciously pleased to enter into negotiations with the Great Powers of Europe, for the purpose of obtaining their co-operation in the recognition of the independence of the Confederate States of North America.¹⁸

The challenge had been issued; Roebuck had stated at the beginning of his speech that he expected to receive abuse for the cause he championed. The first to reply to Roebuck was, however, not a friend of the Union. Rather, this dissenter was a supporter of the Confederacy who disagreed with Roebuck's assertion that the time for recognition was nigh, Lord Robert Montagu.¹⁹

Montagu, a conservative who sat in Parliament for Huntingdonshire, was known as a powerful speaker and an active politician. His oratory on Roebuck's motion was important in its presentation of an opposing, yet still pro-Confederate, viewpoint. Montagu attacked virtually every point in Roebuck's background speech, while retaining a firm base in logic. He struck at Roebuck's personal attacks in a rather indignant tone, and then attacked Roebuck as a puppet of Napoleon III. Montagu maneuvered to systematically debunk Roebuck's precedents with quotations and precedents of his own. Montagu appealed to the honor of Great Britain, stressing the equation of acceptance of Roebuck's motion with a declaration of war against the Union. Montagu questioned the wisdom of interfering when the South was so close to victory, thus stealing the glory of winning from the Confederacy and angering them. Finally, he stated that to prorogue the war would only serve to increase tensions, and hostilities would break out once again as soon as both sides were rested. To that end, Montagu proposed an amendment to Roebuck's motion. Montagu's amendment asked that, instead of negotiating with Europe for recognition of the Confederacy, the government should continue to maintain an impartial neutrality in the Civil War.²⁰

Further illustrating the split among friends of the Confederacy, Mr. Clifford echoed Montagu's sentiments immediately after the latter's speech. He, too, attacked the personal nature of the remarks Roebuck made. Clifford attacked Montagu's personal retorts as well, however, but supported the conclusions to which Montagu arrived concerning the implications of recognition. Clifford reiterated the pro-Confederate belief that the states possessed

the right to secede, and that the Union was acting unjustly in trying to coerce them, but that recognition was premature. Within the very ranks of the pro-Confederates, then, there existed a schism over the timing of recognition; this was the very issue that plagued the Palmerston ministry.²¹

During the debate of 30 June Prime Minister Palmerston was ill and consequently unable to attend Parliament. Roebuck referred to his absence, calling him the personification of the government, and perhaps Roebuck hoped to lock horns with Palmerston on the question of France's position on the matter of recognition. The only government ministers who tendered opinions at this stage of the debate were the Right Honourable William Ewart Gladstone, and Sir George Grey, Secretary of State for the Home Department.²²

Gladstone, Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time of the debate and a future Prime Minister, made his view of recognition clear. He opposed Roebuck's enmity towards the United States, imploring caution when including British interests in the debate. While making no concrete remarks to indicate his preference, he hints at a desire to see the reunion of the warring parties. Gladstone backs this up by his own discussion of British interests in North America, and the potential fate of a divided United States that might target these interests. While Gladstone echoed the sentiments of Roebuck in desiring an end to the war, he also came down firmly against both recognition of the Confederacy and Montagu's amendment, addressing both pro-Union and pro-Confederate considerations in hopes of placing all of them firmly against recognition until the war has reached a terminus.²³

Sir George Grey addressed the House of Commons immediately after the fiery speech of the Radical, John Bright, and shortly before the debate was adjourned. Grey's topic of speech consisted entirely of possible transgressions of foreign policy involved in the unsanctioned diplomacy of Lindsay and Roebuck. Grey chastised Roebuck for being the spokesman of a foreign sovereign. While communicating the views of Napoleon III on recognition might have been unproblematic, stated Grey, carrying a complaint to Parliament which instead should have been tendered through the offices of Lord Russell (the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs) was clearly a violation of accepted etiquette. Furthermore, Grey added, Roebuck's assertions were not corroborated by the French consuls in London, and the correspondence that Napoleon felt was wrongfully forwarded to Union Secretary of State William H. Seward was not secret in the least. Ending his oratory, Grey repeats his assertion that Napoleon III had no grounds for complaint, and certainly Roebuck had no right to act as the agent of the French Emperor in relaying the complaint to Parliament. While these speeches from officials of the government may not have been meant to hurt Roebuck, they did not

come from his avowed opponents, and perhaps that made them more damaging to his position. The pro-Union members were similar in their condemnations of the Roebuck motion and its authors.²⁴

Roebuck expected to receive opposition from pro-Union members during the course of the debates, an anticipation which was displayed in the opening remarks Roebuck made during his speech of introduction. Roebuck was surely not guilty of paranoia, for opposition arose in the form of William E. Forster and John Bright, both of whom lambasted Roebuck at this juncture of the debate. Forster, a 'conservative liberal' from Bradford and an extremely prominent member of Parliament, and Bright, a Radical Party member from Birmingham whose oratory skills were well-known and highly respected, were both strongly in favor of workers' interests and against slavery. In their speeches, they did not reiterate Montagu's unhappiness with Roebuck's personal comments. Instead, both men struck hard at Roebuck's anti-American overtones and his apparent defense of slavery in addition to his assertions of Union impotence and French cooperation.²⁵

Forster made his oratory focus upon each of these in turn, stopping longest on the question of slavery. The first point which he endeavored to make concerned the threat of war with the Union, opposing specifically Roebuck's assertion that the Union Navy was of no consequence. From there he moved to another facet of a United States-Great Britain break: a potential food shortage added to the cotton shortages already extant. Forster was also quick to lash out at Roebuck regarding the visit to Napoleon, and made reference to the question he had posed to Layard immediately before the beginning of the debate. The Americans, said Forster, feared foreign intervention more than any other threat, and a xenophobic Union response to French attempts at mediation was indicative of this. The largest segment of Forster's speech, though, was his tirade on slavery and Great Britain's moral right to oppose slavery whenever and wherever possible, calling the Confederacy a "Slave Confederation", based upon "Slavery, Subordination, and Government".²⁶ Forster's impassioned anti-slavery plea was so animated that it inspired Lord Robert Cecil to label him a fanatic.²⁷

Bright's rebuttal was caustic so much so that it has in itself been the subject of scholarly debate. He attacked Roebuck at each turn, especially regarding his anti-American sentiment and his amateur diplomacy. This first point became a position at which Bright also attacked Lindsay's part in the whole affair. Bright threw personal attacks against both Roebuck and Lindsay, deploring the idea that they should wish to break up a friendly nation, in the name of Roebuck's jealousy of America's prosperity. Bright stressed heavily upon the moral ramifications of supporting the Confederacy, providing figures and arguments designed to generate overt hostility to the Confederacy as

the defender of slavery. Bright did not speak much of fear of war against the Union, but he does make an occasional reference to it. Of France, Bright simply stated that "the Emperor runs the risk of being far too much represented in this House!"²⁸ After the attacks of Montagu, Clifford, and Forster, Roebuck may have worried about receiving any support at all for his motion. One opinion in favor of Roebuck's initiative was, however, extant on the 30th, from Lord Robert Cecil.²⁹

Without Lindsay's corroboration, the only spokesman in behalf of Roebuck's motion was Cecil. Cecil's oratory fell immediately after Forster's, and immediately before Bright's. He spoke more pragmatically than Roebuck, and was less given to passion and judgment of his fellow members. Cecil believed that recognition of the Confederacy was not the tacit approval of slavery, but rather a means to achieving the end of slavery. Like the other pro-Confederates, Cecil believed that the United States was not destined to be restored. He echoed Roebuck's sentiment that, because of this, Great Britain must act to effect the speediest possible end to the conflict. Not only was recognition the honorable and humane course of action for Great Britain to take, Cecil asserted, but precedent once again favored recognition in the case of a successful rebellion against the mother country. Cecil contended that, since the United States government itself had set these precedents in dealing with Latin America, the same rules of conduct were therefore applicable to the situation within the United States itself. Concerning the fears of Gladstone, Cecil implored the government not to be given to hypothetical rhetoric designed to create chimerical fears.³⁰

Concerning Roebuck's diplomacy, Cecil postulated that Napoleon's reasons for following this course were probably sound, or else the Emperor would not have consented to such an irregular procedure. Later, in rebuttal to Sir George Grey's attack upon Roebuck's trip to France and his denial of impropriety in forwarding communiqués to the United States, Cecil insinuated that if a breach of etiquette had occurred, the responsibility for it was Lord Russell's alone.³¹

There were several points at which individuals spoke with no long tirades on recognition, addressing instead the validity of Roebuck's diplomacy with France and the perceived feeling of the belligerents in North America. These remarks illustrate the drift of the debate, from the subject of recognition to the subject of diplomacy. Two speakers interjected on this day: Percy Wyndham, member for the western division of Cumberland, and Charles Newdigate Newdegate, a Conservative member from North Warwickshire. Wyndham's short address was a simple statement of opinion, his belief that any call for peace coming from the concert of Europe would be welcome in the United States. In his words, a faint pro-Confederate bias is detectable,

but it is not concrete, rather an observation. Newdegate, speaking after Sir George Grey, came down against recognition, he stated, on the basis of the unauthorized diplomacy of Roebuck. Newdegate said that he must vote against recognition, for the concrete facts in America were not offset by the hearsay of Roebuck on the subject of French cooperation. Shortly after Newdegate spoke, the debate was adjourned. The debate was to be resumed on 2 July.³²

III

The period between the first and second debates was fraught with behind-the-scenes activity and repeated prorogation of the second debate. Within Parliament, pro-Union factions sought to further undercut Roebuck by calling questions to the floor concerning Roebuck's French adventure. Various individuals put resumption of the debate itself off on several occasions, for various reasons. Finally, this period was characterized by a flurry of correspondence from all corners, most of it hostile to Roebuck.

Activity related to the motion between 30 June and 10 July was restricted to the question of Roebuck's allegations of Louis Napoleon's position on recognition. Forster brought the question before Commons on 2 July 1863. The debate on the matter quickly became a verbal shooting match between the under-secretary for foreign affairs and Roebuck. Layard made an unusually long response to the question before him, despite Roebuck's protests that the matter was already before the House as a matter of debate and therefore should not be discussed. Layard, however, was determined to clear the government of any wrongdoing. Since Roebuck took the liberty of addressing the complaint of a foreign sovereign to Commons himself, Layard felt obliged to tell the government's side of the story concerning the forwarded communiqué. Layard's statements contradicted those which Roebuck had made, discrediting Roebuck's words still further.³³

Questions about the continuance of the debate occurred thrice between 30 June and 10 July. These questions were raised on 2, 3, and 6 July. Roebuck, on two occasions, asked for a date on which the debate could be resumed. Sir George Grey, in an answer to the question posed on July 2, referred to a desire postpone the debate in order to receive Palmerston's feelings on the matter. Bright and his supporters, confident of victory, appear to have wished to press the motion to a vote before the next mail, but that request was denied. On 3 July, Grey answered Roebuck's same question with the belief that Palmerston would be in Parliament on 13 July. On 6 July, Palmerston himself answered the same question posed a third time by Roebuck, and expressed a desire to conclude the debates. The date for completion of debate was finally set for

13 July 1863.³⁴

Correspondence between the debatory periods was voluminous. Palmerston wrote to Roebuck on July 9th, imploring him to omit mention of Napoleon in further discussion of the motion. Communication between Mason and Confederate Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin was extant as well. Mason wrote to Benjamin on July 3d, relating the activities of the previous day in Commons. He pointed out that Napoleon's complaint referred to correspondence on the blockade, not recognition, and therefore Layard's defensive status was dodging the allegation somewhat.³⁵

Much later, on July 19, John Slidell, Confederate commissioner to France, sent a letter to Benjamin outlining his observations on the Roebuck-Napoleon controversy. Slidell contended that Roebuck's license to communicate the content of his meeting with Napoleon III was limited to the discussion on recognition; thus, by referring a confidential complaint, Roebuck had overstepped this boundary. Slidell also rebuked the contention that any written statement was forwarded to the Union, because the only written communication sent to Great Britain had been published by the French themselves. Although Slidell's communication occurred after the conclusion of debates, it reflects his beliefs concerning Roebuck's actions, and has therefore been included here. During this period, then, many concerns about Roebuck's openness with Napoleon's words, as well as the timing of his motion, had been aired; these concerns would play heavily into the next part of the debate on 10 July.³⁶

July 10th marked the beginning of the end for Roebuck's motion, even though the debate was not scheduled to continue until the 13th. On this date, a question placed before Roebuck in Commons turned into an expression of reasons why the motion should or should not be withdrawn. The debate on this date, though it was not on the substance of the motion, clearly indicated the perceptions of those interested in its implications.³⁷

Sir James Fergusson, Conservative member for Ayrshire, put that question to Roebuck before Commons, which turned into an expression of Fergusson's belief that recognition was a dead letter. Fergusson stated his conviction that pursuit of the motion would end up benefiting none of the parties in the conflict and implored Roebuck to withdraw his motion. One of Fergusson's points, notably, was that "several Members of the House, who agreed in principle with the hon. and learned Member for Sheffield [Roebuck], and concurred in his object, would yet not support him,"³⁸ specifically because the timing was perceived as wrong. Fergusson believed that the situation in the United States was too fluid at that time to allow Parliament to commit to a stance.³⁹

Prime Minister Palmerston, having returned from his illness, was the first

to reply to the sentiments of Fergusson. Palmerston echoed the sentiments of Fergusson, adding that no continuance of the debate could be made without also discussing Roebuck and Lindsay's French adventure. Palmerston stated that while Roebuck and Lindsay may have been justified in visiting Napoleon III, they had no right to bring those statements before Parliament. Palmerston spoke at length on the French question alone, indicating by his tone the embarrassment of the situation. Later in the debate, in defense of his statements, he explicitly denied that he had agreed to state, on 13 July, a definite course the British government would take concerning the Confederacy. The actions of government would, however, speak for themselves.⁴⁰

Immediately following Palmerston's statements, Lindsay finally rose to defend himself. Lindsay defended his position on the grounds that Palmerston had previously used Lindsay's knowledge of marine matters to negotiate navigation duties with Napoleon III. Lindsay defended Roebuck's statements as true, while conceding that he would not, in Roebuck's place, have revealed as many of the sensitive details. He echoed Roebuck's belief that France would fall in line if Great Britain recognized, and asked that the House of Commons wait until the 13th for Roebuck to make a decision on continuance of the debate. Lindsay did, however, display some lack of confidence in the success of the motion at that time. He specifically wanted Roebuck to wait until after the next mail from America which presumably would contain the news of Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania before making his decision.⁴¹

William Forster made a speech which clearly indicated his personal feelings on continuation. He wished to carry the motion to conclusion. Forster reinforced his opinion as a matter of principle, not as a matter of sympathy for Union or Confederacy. Forster believed it was apparent by that time that the motion would fail. Perhaps Forster also saw that the failure of Roebuck's motion would be a great moral victory for the Union. Forster wished that Roebuck would make a decision immediately whether he would continue the debate.⁴²

Previously unheard-from individuals also added to the debate on continuance of the motion. Bernal Osborne, member for Liskeard, indicated that he wished the matter to be either immediately dropped or pushed to completion on the 13th. William H. Gregory, member from Galway and a long-time supporter of the Confederate cause, made a statement that if Roebuck's motion were defeated, it would indicate that the British government was against the independence of the Confederacy, even if the House of Commons was mostly pro-Confederate. Therefore, Gregory believed that the motion should be withdrawn.⁴³

The most important observation of the day, however, was rendered by Lord Robert Cecil, and was clearly a product of his support of the Confederacy in combination with the astute political mind he possessed. Cecil made the observation that most members who were friends of the Confederacy were in favor of withdrawing the motion, a sentiment which even whispered into Lindsay's statements. He also observed, having spoken shortly after Forster, that only the friends of the Union were in favor of continuing the motion. Cecil, however, asked Roebuck to hold off making a decision until the 13th, when news of great Confederate victories was expected to arrive.⁴⁴

Roebuck's actions as messenger of Napoleon III was another topic in the debate of 10 July. Alexander W. Kinglake, representing Bridgwater, also made an observation that the question of Roebuck and Napoleon should not be omitted from the debate as it had already been introduced to the House. Charles Newdigate Newdegate, speaking after Forster, placed his emphasis on the question of international protocol, and Roebuck's statements on behalf of Napoleon. Newdegate saw Roebuck's statements as a great breach of etiquette, and highly improper. Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs Layard also made a statement concerning the truth of Roebuck's allegations about mishandling of French communiqués. On several occasions, Layard hints that Roebuck had not relayed the words of Napoleon III exactly, a tactful way of intimating that Roebuck was a liar. The dispatch Layard said Napoleon must have referenced was either one which simultaneously appeared in the *Moniteur*, the French official paper, or else it did not exist. Layard also strongly believed that Roebuck far overstepped his bounds in bringing forth Napoleon III's complaints.⁴⁵

Roebuck eventually decided to withhold his decision on continuance until 13 July, attributing his decision to the sentiments of Lord Cecil who spoke immediately before him. On the 13th, Roebuck would make a decision regarding the pursuit of his motion. In the meantime, James Mason actually felt greater confidence stemming from the debate of the 10th, as reflected in his communication to Secretary of State Benjamin in Richmond on the 11th. This confidence was not to bear fruit, for on 13 July their position would be converted to one of retreat in Commons.⁴⁶

IV

On the 13th, Roebuck made a decision. He decided that, because of government's apparent position combined with the lack of great Confederate victories during the course of the debate, he would withdraw the motion from consideration in Parliament. Roebuck and Lindsay spoke extensively in

defense of their actions in meeting with Napoleon. However, the fiasco had done its damage, and Palmerston further attacked the base of credibility upon which their defense was based. On this date, pro-Union activists were nearly silent, and the matter was closed. However, this final group of statements, from Roebuck, Lindsay, and Palmerston, clearly outline the change in perceptions that occurred between 20 June and 13 July 1863. Roebuck stated that he was opposed to removing his motion, and in actuality was probably pressured into doing so by the pro-Confederate lobby in Parliament.⁴⁷

The effects of Roebuck's treatment by government, pro-Union, and even pro-Confederate members were momentous. After the failure of Roebuck's motion, the tone between Great Britain and the Confederacy changed for the worse. On 4 August 1863, the Confederate secretary of state, Judah P. Benjamin, wrote James Mason, Confederate envoy in London, stating that "The perusal of the recent debates in the British Parliament satisfies the President that the Government of Her Majesty has determined to decline the overtures made through you for establishing by treaty friendly relations between the two Governments, and entertains no intentions of receiving you as the accredited Minister of this Government near the British Court."⁴⁸ Mason's mission to Britain was officially withdrawn upon his receipt of Benjamin's above dispatch on 14 September 1863. It was terminated largely because of the hostile government position indicated during the debates, and the heightened tensions helped contribute to the expulsion of British consular agents from the Confederacy later in 1863.⁴⁹

Recognition was never extended to the Confederacy by France or Great Britain. Eventually, only the Vatican would ever extend recognition to the Confederate States of America. The Roebuck motion was only prevented from becoming a complete failure by its withdrawal, and it slammed shut the last door to Confederate hopes of recognition in Great Britain.⁵⁰

V

The Roebuck motion for recognition of the Confederacy failed to achieve its objective, not because of any lack of sympathy for the Confederate cause but rather other concerns that stemmed from the effects endemic to recognition. A fear of war, concerns over Napoleon III's veracity, and the moral issue of slavery all served to create an atmosphere in which Roebuck's initiative could not possibly have succeeded. These issues all combined in one way or another to create the opposing viewpoints Roebuck faced. The schism within pro-Confederate ranks, the issue of Roebuck's diplomacy, and the revelation of government policy were all of the highest magnitude in beating down the motion.

The most important event was the division of pro-Confederates on the recognition issue, which was underlaid by a fear of war. Without a united front, Roebuck was left with few supporters of his efforts on behalf of the Confederacy. Even Lindsay did not back him fully in the end, and this lack of strong support forced Roebuck to withdraw his motion rather than suffer a defeat at the hands of pro-Unionists.

Roebuck and Lindsay traveled to France looking for support, but instead found a controversy which raised questions about Roebuck's sincerity and his motives in bringing the motion before Parliament. Both he and Lindsay were heavily attacked for this action, and the truthfulness of Napoleon III's statements were called into question. In the end, this amateur statesmanship proved to be a powerful weapon against Roebuck, Lindsay, and the motion.

Another telling event was the position of government. Palmerston was following an approach that emphasized neutrality, but Roebuck's actions forced the government to make some sort of statement confirming that policy. Roebuck's lack of any support in government for his motion contributed to its defeat. Later, the views expressed by Palmerston and Layard would prompt the Confederacy to end Mason's mission to Great Britain. The British government saw the question as one of self-preservation, and recognition was a step they could ill afford to take.

NOTES

- 1 Howard Jones, *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 223.
- 2 D.P. Crook, *The North, The South, and the Powers 1861-1865* (New York: John Wiley, 1974), 309-315; Brian Jenkins, *Britain and the War for the Union* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980), 2:308-313.
- 3 Jones, *Union in Peril*, 27-29; Lord John Russell (1st Earl), *The Later Correspondence of Lord John Russell, 1840-1878*, ed. G. P. Gooch (London: Longmans, Green, 1925), 320, 326-328.
- 4 Donaldson Jordan and Edwin J. Pratt, *Europe and the American Civil War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 125-163, 130.
- 5 Joseph O. Baylen, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals* (Sussex: Harvester, 1984), vol. 2, 1830-1870, 436, 439; Robert Eadon Leader, *Life and Letters of the Rt. Hon. J. A. Roebuck* (London: Edward Arnold, 1897), 189-199; Frank L. Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1931), 46.
- 6 George Smith, *The Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee (London: Oxford University, 1917), vol. 11 (Kennett-Lluellyn), 1195-1196.

- 7 Russell, *Correspondence*, 326-327.
- 8 Owsley, *Cotton*, 467, 466.
- 9 James D. Richardson, ed., *Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Confederacy, Including the Diplomatic Correspondence* (Nashville: United States Publishing, 1905), 2:517.
- 10 Richardson, *Compilation*, 2:527, 2:530, 2:531, 2:532.
- 11 Richardson, *Compilation*, 2:532.
- 12 Richardson, *Compilation*, 2:532, 2:530; Owsley, *Cotton*, 472-473.
- 13 *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3d ser., vol. 171 (1863), cols. 1771-1841, 1838.
- 14 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1771-1841.
- 15 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, col. 1769; Owsley, *Cotton*, 473-474.
- 16 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1772-1774.
- 17 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1775-1780; Owsley, *Cotton*, 476.
- 18 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, col. 1780.
- 19 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1771, 1780; Owsley, *Cotton*, 476.
- 20 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1780-1797; Owsley, *Cotton*, 476.
- 21 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1797-1800.
- 22 Owsley, *Cotton*, p.478; *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, col. 1774.
- 23 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1800-1812.
- 24 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1838-1840.
- 25 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, col. 1771.
- 26 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, col. 1816.
- 27 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1812-1818.
- 28 See James R. Andrews, "The Rhetorical Shaping of National Interest: Morality and Contextual Potency in John Bright's Parliamentary Speech against Recognition of the Confederacy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 40-60, and Stanford P. Gluin, "Slavery and English Polarity: The Persuasive Campaign of John Bright against English Recognition of the CSA," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 49 (1984): 406-419; *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, col. 1827.
- 29 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1825-1828; Owsley, *Cotton*, p. 477.
- 30 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1818-1824.
- 31 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1824-1825, 1840.
- 32 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 171, cols. 1838, 1840-1841.
- 33 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 172 (1863), cols. 68-73.
- 34 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 172, cols. 67, 177, 252.
- 35 Owsley, *Cotton*, 479; Richardson, *Compilation*, 524-525.
- 36 Richardson, *Compilation*, 537-539.
- 37 Owsley, *Cotton*, 479.
- 38 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 172, col. 555
- 39 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 172, cols. 554-556.
- 40 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 172, cols. 556-558, 561, 569.

- 41 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 172, cols. 558-561.
- 42 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 172, cols. 564-565.
- 43 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 172, cols. 562, 562-564.
- 44 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 172, cols. 565-566.
- 45 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 172, cols. 561-562, 565, 566-569.
- 46 *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 172, col. 566; Richardson, *Compilation*, 534-535.
- 47 Owsley, *Cotton*, 479.
- 48 Richardson, *Compilation*, 539.
- 49 Owsley, *Cotton*, 487, 488, 511-514; Eugene H. Berwanger, *The British Foreign Service and the American Civil War* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 108-109.
- 50 Owsley, *Cotton*, 517-526.