

Symbol on the Waves: Model of the *CSS Alabama*
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2nd Place, Museum of Southern History

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

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

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

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

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

² Donald Canney, *Lincoln's Navy: The Ships, Men and Organization, 1861*

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

the *Alabama* defeated the *USS*