

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

---

## Between-the-Lines Trading—Treasonous or Patriotic Acts?

By **David G. Surdam**, University of Northern Iowa

Rhett Butler and General Benjamin Butler represent ends of the spectrum of the between-the-lines trading during the Civil War. The fictional Rhett Butler was a daring, handsome rake, who embodied the romance of the Civil War. General Butler was not handsome and a craven politician, who remains reviled throughout the former Confederate states. Each character, though, exemplified this tawdry episode in American history: Rhett illegally ran the naval blockade; Benjamin was expected of profiting from legally trading with southerners.

Americans had never been hesitant to trade with the enemy during wartime. Their attitude seemed to be, it's an ill war that blows no windfall profits. From the French and Indian War through the War of 1812, Americans traded with their enemies. Even though the Civil War was a ruthless, internecine struggle, some Americans proved willing, even eager, to trade with their erstwhile enemies.

Trade loomed large for the Confederacy's hope to make secession permanent. The Confederate states needed to obtain war materiel, medicines, foodstuffs, and even such prosaic items as engraving materials for their currency from the northern states and Europe. Even before firing on Fort Sumter, Southerners hurried to New York City and to Europe to order war supplies and engraving tools before Federal authorities shut down such inter-belligerent trading. Prior to the war, the South sent cotton and other staple products to Europe (and New York); England sent manufactured goods to New York and northern ports; New York and northern ports re-exported European manufactured goods, as well as Northern-produced goods to the South. Midwest growers sent produce down the Mississippi to be consumed by southerners along the river and to be shipped from New Orleans.

One aspect of international trade was of crucial importance. The antebellum southern cotton growers collectively produced 70-80% of the total amount of raw cotton used by British, French, and New England textile producers. The growers had difficulty conspiring to raise the price of raw cotton prior to the war, but a Confederate government might have exploited the region's dominance of the input via an adroit export duty. In any event, the region's price-setting power in the market for raw cotton promised to

allow the Confederate government to raise sufficient funds to sustain large-scale loans in Europe while the reduced crop would also free up manpower to fight. Both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis subscribed to the thesis that a complete dearth of raw cotton would so disrupt British industry as to induce that country to intervene in the war. Lincoln told British observers that the surest way to restore a healthy flow of raw cotton was to intervene on the side of the North; Davis, of course, suggested the opposite. The southerners had already exported their cotton crop of late 1860 before hostilities began in April 1861, so the issue was moot for several months.

President Lincoln ordered the federal navy to blockade southern ports immediately after the fall of Fort Sumter. After an initial period, the blockade proved remarkably effective. The blockade had three main effects. The between-the-lines trading was intertwined with the blockade.<sup>1</sup>

First, the blockade made futile any Confederate attempts to use raw cotton as an economic weapon. Although prices of raw cotton soared, southerners reaped relatively little of the run-up in prices. The blockade helped shackle King Cotton.

Second, the blockade deterred imports of crucial munitions and armaments. Although the Confederate army obtained arms from Federal arsenals located within the South and from captured arms on battlefields, it needed more than these sources to arm its troops. After the declarations of secession, Federal and Confederate agents flocked to Europe to purchase war materiel, particularly shoulder arms. Northern arms buyers were profligate in their purchases (European arms dealers were delighted to exhaust their stocks of obsolete shoulder arms), and they drove up the prices of war materiel and curtailed the nascent Confederacy's ability to arm its troops. Confederate purchasing of arms was also hampered by the shaky Confederate finances. The blockade also increased the final cost of the weapons, both from high shipping costs and from actual losses and captures of vessels carrying the Confederate purchases. Confederate chief of ordnance Major Josiah Gorgas lamented that "a large proportion of his [purchasing agent's] purchases have fallen into the hands of the enemy."<sup>2</sup> Third, the South was essentially self-sufficient with regard to foodstuffs, but the region required much intraregional movement of grains and meat products during peacetime. During wartime, the concentration of troops in Tennessee and northern Virginia required large amounts of grain, meat, and hay. Intraregional movement of food by land was unwieldy at best. Shipment by rickety railroads proved difficult, and wagon transport was inordinately expensive for long haul shipments. The southern railroads were not designed for heavy shipments of foodstuffs, nor were the railroads designed for south-to-north shipments. Most southern railroads were designed mainly to drain cotton from inland cotton-growing

---

<sup>1</sup> David Surdam, *Northern Naval Superiority and the Economics of the American Civil War* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 1-8.

<sup>2</sup> United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series IV, volume 2, p. 227 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, IV, pt. 2, 227).

regions to port cities. Coastwise shipping would have been more efficient in conveying bulky foodstuffs. Because the Union Navy occupied Chesapeake Bay and sealed off New Orleans/Mobile and, it prevented cheap, sea-borne transportation of bulky grain shipments to Virginia and Tennessee.

The blockade's effectiveness can be seen by the widening difference between the inflation-adjusted prices of a pound of raw cotton at southern ports and at New York or Liverpool. The real prices of cotton at New York and Liverpool tripled and quadrupled during the war while remaining stagnant at southern ports. Normally the difference in price between southern ports and New York ranged between one or two cents (or pence) per pound, but by the middle of the Civil War the difference was on the order of twenty cents per pound or more. The Union Navy, in effect, erected a nearly impassable barrier between southern ports and those of New York, Liverpool, and France.<sup>3</sup>

Because the prices of southern staple products such as raw cotton and tobacco stagnated, while prices of manufactured goods soared, blockade runners, smugglers, and between-the-lines traders could reap potentially large profits. The blockade-running vessels, though, were ships built specifically for that purpose; they were not efficient carriers of bulky cargo. A real-life Rhet Butler would have found it more profitable to bring in high-priced, small luxury items rather than bulky war munitions. Although we think of Rhet Butler as a swashbuckling dare-devil, he was not placing his life in much danger while running the blockade; indeed, he could have safely carried the tempestuous Scarlett O'Hara on his blockade runner. Northern sailors had little incentive to sink or harm blockade runners or their vessels, as there were potentially lucrative gains to be had by *capturing* such targets. The real risk for blockade runners and their investors, of course, was the loss of vessel and cargo. As historian Stanley Lebergott points out, the handsome rates of return from successful breaches of the blockade were whittled down considerably, when the risk of loss of property was factored in.<sup>4</sup>

Some blockade runners opted for the mouth of the Rio Grande. Because the Rio Grande was under international jurisdiction, Union blockading vessels could not intercept runners hugging the Mexican side of the river. Cotton was brought to Brownsville and ferried across the river to Matamoros for the outbound run; in return, New York, European, and Mexican goods were then surreptitiously shipped across the river. Mexican authorities imposed hefty taxes on raw cotton and also on goods heading into Texas. The trade here demonstrated the desperate lengths southerners were prepared to endure to get their cotton through the blockade. Brownsville, Texas was 200 or more miles from the major Texas settlements across wild, rugged country. Wagon shipments were inefficient, and southerners needed ropes, bagging, and other materials just to

---

<sup>3</sup> Surdam, *Northern Naval Superiority*, 158-9.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Ekelund, and Mark Thornton. "The Union Blockade and Demoralization of the South: Relative Prices in the Confederacy," in *Social Science Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (December 1992): 890-902; Stanley Lebergott, "Through the Blockade--The Profitability and Extent of Cotton Smuggling, 1861-1865." *Journal of Economic History* 41, no. 4 (December 1981): 867-88.

prepare their cotton for export, in addition to replacement wagons and livestock; these supplies had to be purchased from and shipped by New Yorkers and Mexicans. Most of the war materiel received at Brownsville undoubtedly remained in the Trans-Mississippi (sometimes referred to as Kirby Smithdom after the commanding Confederate general Edmund Kirby Smith). The trade did not provide much succor for the main Confederate war effort east of the Mississippi. The United States Congress later investigated some New York businessmen, who allegedly shipped their goods to neutral Caribbean ports prior to being transferred to blockade runners. Southerners exported perhaps 70,000 bales of cotton via the Rio Grande.

The blockade runner's counterpart on land--the overland trader--faced an intriguing opportunity. If the trader could somehow pass through military lines, he could reap inordinate profits. Many foodstuffs and other commodities became increasingly expensive in the Confederate states (even with respect to prices stated in gold and not the incredibly shrinking Confederate dollar). A trader could buy cotton cheap in the South and sell it for an impressive markup in New York. He could buy cheap manufactured products or perhaps some packed meat to take South in order to buy more cotton; such manufactured goods reaped high prices down South. In doing so, he would have a huge advantage over other traders who faced the blockade. The potential profits staggered the minds of 1860s Americans. The trick was to get official permission to pass through military lines. In some cases, an unscrupulous trader might bribe officials, but the Lincoln administration provided a legal avenue.

Northern military successes in the first year of the war opened up Norfolk, Memphis, and New Orleans for trade. Lincoln and his generals permitted restricted trade in these areas. One justification for allowing trade in occupied Confederate territory was to foster Unionism in the Border States (Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee). As Lincoln memorably put it, "I hope to have God on my side, but I must have Kentucky." The Union forces maintained sometimes tenuous holds on Missouri and Kentucky throughout the war. By allowing trade, the Lincoln administration and Union generals hoped to succor the civilians and, perhaps, to create gratitude. For purported humanitarian reasons, Union army officers, including well-known hard case Major General William Tecumseh Sherman, allowed local growers around Memphis to bring in a bale or two of cotton to exchange for supplies. Sherman quickly became disillusioned with such trade, viewing it as a conduit for Confederate forces to obtain badly needed supplies, especially salt and packed meat. Sherman's successor at Memphis, Major General Cadwallader Colden Washburn complained, "Memphis has been of more value to the Southern Confederacy since it fell into Federal hands than Nassau" (a key staging point for European and New York contraband destined for import into the Confederacy). Although Washburn may have been guilty of hyperbole, his lament is understandable.<sup>5</sup>

These between-the-lines trading activities gave rise to the romance of southern belles smuggling medicines and other small items in their voluminous hoop skirts, as they

---

<sup>5</sup> William E. Gienapp, "Abraham Lincoln and the Border States," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 13, no. 1 (1992):13; *O.R.*, I, 39, pt. 2, 22.

passed beguiled Yankee pickets. The reality was probably more mundane, with men and women driving a wagon with a bale or two of cotton through Union checkpoints and returning with food and perhaps some other consumer items. Who consumed the food was a contentious issue, with many Union officers suspecting that Confederate soldiers were the beneficiaries.

Soldiers on both sides undoubtedly conducted impromptu trades of small items. One can imagine opposing pickets calling out to each other (one of the advantages of a Civil War is that both sides speak the same language) offering goods for exchange. Perhaps they met or tossed items across a stream or ravine: southern tobacco for Yankee manufactured goods. These trades, of course, had scant effect upon the war's outcome, unlike some larger scale trading activities.

One obscure aspect of the between-the-lines trade is fascinating and reveals the Confederacy's economic weakness. The new country was initially short of good-quality currency. Philadelphia businessman Samuel Curtis Upham found that selling facsimiles of Confederate currency, ostensibly as souvenirs, proved popular. He cleverly marked his counterfeits with the inscription: "Facsimile Confederate Note—Sold Wholesale and Retail by S.C. Upham, 403 Chestnut Street Philadelphia." People wanting to use these well-printed notes simply cut off the inscription and used the bills to buy cotton and other commodities in the South. Economist Mark Weidenmier points out that the Federal government contacted Upham, and the possibility exists that they countenanced his activities in an attempt to de-stabilize the already tottering Confederate currency. Here, again, was a case of a northern businessman doing well by serving his country. Eventually, the dramatic fall in the value of Confederate currency, real or counterfeit, induced a switch to Federal Greenbacks in the cotton trade. Upham was not the only northerner printing Confederate currency. Northerner Winthrop Hilton secretly agreed with the Confederate government to print Confederate currency; when the Confederates failed to pay him, he insinuated the currency into the South, contributing to the general over-issue of currency. A joke at the time was—How can you tell a counterfeit Grayback from a legitimate one? The counterfeit currency was of a higher quality.

In New Orleans, General Benjamin Butler proved an enthusiastic proponent of between-the-lines trade. The General, reviled by southerners and many northerners alike, was a colorful character. Although he easily makes a hypothetical southerners' Top-Ten, most-hated Yankees list, he did maintain law and order in the occupied city and with a minimum of bloodshed. Few occupied cities have suffered as lightly as New Orleans. Butler boasted that you could count on one hand the number of city residents executed; he claimed to have executed more of his own soldiers than city residents. Many southerners and northerners believed that wherever Butler went, corruption was sure to follow, although he was so wily that no one could prove his corruption. His brother and close associates usually were directly involved in the trading. Butler later went to Norfolk, where he continued to encourage between-the-lines trading.

Butler encouraged trade and opened up communications with Confederate and state officials throughout the lower Mississippi Valley, even though these were still Confederate-controlled areas. Butler justified the re-opening of trade by appealing to the necessity of getting foodstuff to feed the city's residents. Some 300,000 bales of cotton went through New Orleans between April 1862 and the end of the war. Although this was a small fraction of the city's antebellum volume of cotton exports, New Orleans was a major exporter of cotton during the war.

Lincoln, an adept politician, recognized the need to get cotton to serve critical local interests. He badly needed Massachusetts and New York's electoral votes in the upcoming 1864 election. The Massachusetts cotton textile manufacturers had to have cotton in order to stay in business, and Lincoln was unwilling to abandon them. New York was not safely Republican, and Lincoln wanted to insure the support of such men as newspaper publisher Thurlow Weed (Lincoln would win the state by fewer than 7,000 votes in 1864).

Lincoln decided to set up a system to acquire raw cotton. Economist and businessman Edward Atkinson of Massachusetts convinced Lincoln that the high price of cotton in New York City implied that southerners were making as much revenue with smaller amounts of cotton than in 1860—a specious argument as the raw cotton price increased four-fold while the volume was one-ninth (in addition, the southerners did not get all of the revenue from cotton sold in New York or Liverpool). Lincoln, though, liked this rationale and argued: “Better give [southerners] guns for it [cotton] than let [them], as now, get both guns and ammunition for it....And if pecuniary greed can be made to aid us in such effort, let us be thankful that so much good can be got out of pecuniary greed.” Lincoln had it backward: the between-the-lines trade negated the blockade-induced transportation cost differential, so southerners were getting “guns and ammunition” from the between-the-lines trade and only “guns” from the blockade.<sup>6</sup>

As early as 1862, the federal government created a system of licenses. Lincoln wanted the permit system to prevent any trader or group of traders from monopolizing the trade; he insisted that the trade be open to all loyal citizens. Treasury officials, after verifying the prospective trader's loyalty and claim that he owned or controlled cotton within the South, would pay three-fourths of the current market price for cotton; traders could take non-contraband items down south, but only up to one-third the value of the cotton. Some traders wanted to use gold but were restricted to using Greenbacks in buying cotton; southerners naturally wanted gold. When this policy failed to get enough cotton, Congress passed the Purchasing Act of July 1864. This act resulted in obtaining just 55,000 bales (compared to the 1.5 to 2.0 million bales obtained by European and northern buyers during the war).

---

<sup>6</sup> Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. 8 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955; supplement in 1974 Westport, CT: Greenwood Press; second supplement 1990 with Christian O. Basler, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 8:163-4.

Holders of permits still faced risks in the between-the-lines trade for cotton. They had to convince southerners to sell or trade cotton for goods; they had to evade Confederate and Federal patrols; and they had to deal with guerillas. Growers and northerners sometimes resorted to bribery to get their cotton past cavalry pickets. Cotton bales weighing more than 400 pounds were, of course, difficult to smuggle through the lines. No woman could hide a bale under her petticoats and hoop skirt, as with smaller (but often more valuable) items such as medicines. For some of the permit holders, the Union’s military victories depreciated the value of the permits, as the growing probability that the war would soon end sent raw cotton prices tumbling.

Although the system seemed well designed, it was not adroitly implemented. Treasury Agent Hanson Alexander Risley was less-than-diligent about checking whether prospective traders actually controlled or owned cotton in the South. He vetted Lincoln’s friends, Leonard Swett, Provost-marshal Ward Hill Lamon (both from Illinois), and Samuel Noble, a Georgia planter, who claimed to own tens of thousands of bales of cotton spread throughout the South. How Lamon and Swett, who had never dealt in cotton before, could possibly control large amounts of cotton was never questioned. New York’s Thurlow Weed, whom Lincoln needed as an ally, also vouched for some prospective traders. Traders coveted a signed permit from Honest Abe himself. Given the business mores of the time, it is not surprising that many men, mesmerized by the potentially lucrative legal trade, exploited their contacts with Honest Abe. Friends of Abe or friends of friends of Abe often received the coveted trade permits. Lincoln, himself, approved all of the explicit requests made by his friends and family.<sup>7</sup>

The lure of spectacular profits proved too much for even patriotic men. Thurlow Weed, Leonard Swett, Benjamin Butler, and most of the others were unquestionable staunch believers in the Union. They may have rationalized their actions in two ways. First, the Lincoln administration proclaimed that obtaining cotton was necessary to the national interest. Therefore, a trader could convince himself that he was being patriotic by doing well, filling his coffers by getting cotton from southerners and simultaneously helping the national interest. Second, even if the traders recognized the fallacies inherent in the administration’s proclamations concerning cotton, each individual trader probably thought that his mite of trade did not particularly injure the Union cause while potentially making him wealthy.

How deep did the corruption go? New York Governor and United States Senator Edward Denison Morgan and former Illinois Senator Orville Hickman Browning created a group to get cotton out of the South: Browning wrote in his diary “a scheme out of which he [Lincoln], Singleton, Judge Hughes of the Court of Claims, Senator Morgan, myself and some others, hope to make some money, and do the country some service.” Lincoln approved of the venture and said, “he wanted to get out all [the produce] he could and send in all the Green backs he could in exchange”. Browning’s diary entry is

---

<sup>7</sup> David Surdam, “Traders or Traitors: Northern Cotton Trading During the Civil War.” *Business and Economic History* 28, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 301-12.

vague; there was no evidence that Lincoln ever benefited financially from any dealings in raw cotton.<sup>8</sup>

Military officers were not immune to the charms of between-the-lines trading for and, sometimes, outright confiscation of cotton. As historian Ludwell Johnson describes in *Red River Campaign*, Admiral David Dixon Porter hoped to get “prizes of war,” i.e. seized cotton. Other northerners tagged along with the Red River expedition in hopes of getting cotton. In addition to Butler’s shenanigans with his brother Andrew, General Napoleon Dana also used nepotism in his efforts to get cotton, while commanding an occupied district. Other officers, such as Sherman, General of the Army Ulysses S. Grant, and Major General Edward Richard Sprigg Canby, disliked the trade. According to a congressional hearing held between 1864 and 1865, Canby wrote that the trade, “barter[ed] the cause of which [the army] is fighting, with all the baseness of Judas Iscariot, but without his remorse”.<sup>9</sup>

Confederate President Jefferson Davis was a less flexible man than Lincoln; Davis abhorred the between-the-lines trade. His leading general, Robert E. Lee, suggested that such trade was necessary for maintaining the Army of Northern Virginia. Yankees were willing to trade meat for raw cotton and other staple products, and they were willing to do so within close proximity of the railroads leading to Richmond and Lee’s troops. Although Davis disapproved of the trade, desperation induced him to acquiesce in allowing his commissary officers to trade cotton for food. Confederate and Federal officers sometimes met between-the-lines in order to negotiate trade. The common terms of trade were one pound of meat for one pound of raw cotton.

A congressional hearing of 1864-65 heard from witnesses who described the shenanigans occurring around Norfolk. One trader not-so-candidly described his meeting with a Confederate commissary officer at a “fish fry,” where he claimed that the conversation never turned to such mundane topics as trade. On occasion, Union officials traded three pounds of meat for a pound of cotton; these terms of trade were far better than the Confederate government could get via blockade running. Some historians believe that the southeast Virginia trade succored Lee’s army to the extent of prolonging the war.<sup>10</sup>

Lincoln’s policies towards obtaining raw cotton via between-the-lines may have helped his close-run re-election bid in 1864, but helping Massachusetts and New York manufacturers and traders put the war effort at risk. General Ulysses Grant’s strategy was to pin down General Lee and his army within the Petersburg trenches and to starve them out by severing the supply lines from the South; by permitting the trading of food

---

<sup>8</sup> Orville H. Browning, *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning*, edited by Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall vol. 1, James G. Randall, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Springfield, IL: Trustees of the Illinois State Historical Library, 1925), 2:1, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ludwell Johnson, *Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1958); *Trade with Rebellious States*. H.R. Rep. No. 38-24 at 4 (1864-1865), 101-2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, at 132, 147-8, 187-94; Surdam, *Northern Naval Superiority*, 103.

supplies for cotton in southern Virginia, Lincoln's cotton policies were undermining Grant's strategy. If the between-the-lines trade was the only thing sustaining Lee's army in the late summer of 1864, Lincoln ran the risk of exacerbating northern war weariness. After the election, General Grant pressed for and received Lincoln's permission to end the between-the-lines trade. Along with the capture of Wilmington, North Carolina—the last major port for blockade running—the official cessation of trade contributed to Lee's vacating the trenches of Petersburg and his desperate retreat to Appomattox Court House.

As the war neared its conclusion, a growing number of northerners cast skeptical eyes upon Lincoln's policies towards raw cotton. A congressional investigation launched in 1864 concluded that: “[the trade] induced a spirit of speculation and plunder among the people, who have entered into a disgraceful scramble for wealth during a time of war, waged to save the life of the nation, and has fed that greed of gain which must wound the public morals....It is believed to have led to the prolongation of the war, and to have cost the country thousands of lives and millions upon millions of treasure.” The *New York Herald* claimed that the cotton policies induced corruption among prominent northerners and Treasury Department officials, before concluding that the Confederacy and, hence, the war “was kept alive and the war prolonged by villainies carried on from our side [of] the lines by a league of the copperheads and of corrupt men in the confidence of the government.”<sup>11</sup>

Had the North lost the war, the radical Republicans might have investigated and exposed the Lincoln administration's activities. In the light of defeat these actions might have been seen as incompetent or even treasonous in the radicals' eyes. Lincoln, himself, might have faced such opprobrium, had he completed his second term. Radical Republicans were already lukewarm about his policies toward the defeated Confederates, and some stated that his assassination might prove to have been a blessing in disguise. Indiana Senator George Julian wrote “I spent most of the afternoon in a political caucus, held for the purpose of considering the necessity for a new Cabinet and a line of policy less conciliatory than that of Mr. Lincoln; and while everybody was shocked at his murder, the feeling was nearly universal that the accession of [Andrew] Johnson to the Presidency would prove a godsend to the country. Aside from Mr. Lincoln's known policy of tenderness to the Rebels, which now jarred upon the feelings of the hour, his well-known views of the subject of reconstruction were as distasteful as possible to radical Republicans.”<sup>12</sup>

Lincoln would have had plenty of company in such a hypothetical tribunal; his generals, such as Benjamin Butler and Major General John Adams Dix, were enthusiastic Unionists and one might have hesitated in accusing these worthies of being Copperheads. Their activities, viewed retrospectively in the light of a Union defeat, though, might have triggered suspicions. General Butler, in particular, in fact, earned vituperation for his

---

<sup>11</sup> H.R. Rep. No. 38-24 at 1-2; *New York Herald*, July 21, 1865.

<sup>12</sup> George Julian, *Political Recollections, 1840 to the Unfinished Civil War*, 1970 reprint (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1884), 255-6; Benjamin Butler, *Private and Official Correspondence of General Benjamin F. Butler*, 5 vols. (Norwood, MA: Plimpton Press, 1917), 2:75.

leazy activities. Butler was already despised in the Confederacy and by Englishmen (who were scandalized, if not titillated, by Butler's "Women Order" in New Orleans allowing his troops to treat the women of New Orleans as prostitutes plying their trade): "Monster, Murderer, Plunderer, Confiscator, everything that is bad. How long will God permit such a wretch to tread this earth before he goes to the awful doom which awaits him—Hell with all its combined torments, there to slake his thirst with everlasting fire." A northerner chastised Butler in an anonymous letter to a New York newspaper (Butler kept a file of such letters, which he printed in his documentary of his life): "don't think that you have so easily gone to New Orleans and robbed with the aid of your relatives everywhere you had a chance, and that you will not be exposed.... You are fully as much detested here in the North as in the south, and your day of reckoning is at hand.... Your rotten-hearted carcass must be deprived of vitality, your thieving soul of life, so prepare to meet your cohort, the Devil, who wants you more than this country does." Now that is vituperation. In comparison, Rhett Butler's famous, "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn," seems rather pallid. Butler had the last laugh, living for decades after the war and even running for president.<sup>13</sup>

Years later, historian James Ford Rhodes concluded, "for the South [commercial intercourse] was a necessary evil; for the North it was an evil and not a necessary one." Historian Ludwell Johnson, an expert on the between-the-lines trade, lamented, "The war corrupted men, but men corrupted the war." Rhodes' and Johnson's pithy remarks neatly summarize this little-known but disreputable episode of the Civil War.<sup>14</sup>

\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:569.

<sup>14</sup> James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850*, 8 vols. (Harper and Brothers, 1893), 5:420; Ludwell Johnson, "Northern Profit and Profiteers: The Cotton Rings of 1864-1865," in *Civil War History* 12, no. 2 (June 1966): 101-15.