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The Protection of Commerce During War

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This essay won for Capt. Winter the special silver medal of the "Royal United Service Institution," of England, and a cash prize of thirty guineas, in 1897.

"He who commands the sea controls trade and commerce; he who controls trade and commerce commands the wealth and riches of the world; and he who controls wealth controls the world."

The protection of "commerce," while directly applying to the protection of trade and the uninterrupted exchange of commodities between home citizens and those of distant lands, in war-time naturally associates with it the "carrying trade," or, in other words, the ships and vessels engaged in effecting the exchange itself. Thus the protection of commerce during war implies not only the safeguarding of the cargoes, so indispensable to the complex society of our day, but, even more so, the marine vehicles of their transport across the seas, and the prevention of their transfer, either forcibly by an enemy, or from a feeling of inadequate security on the part of the owners, to a flag other than that to which they rightfully belong. Experience has shown in the most marked manner the very natural timidity of proprietors of shipping during wartimes, and the speed with which capital invested in a nation's marine carriers hastens when that nation does not provide (or cannot do so) what they consider adequate security for its safety, to transfer itself to the flag of a neutral, under which the temporary dangers feared are hoped to be avoided. This was exemplified in a most striking manner during the American Civil War, 1861-65. In 1861, at the beginning of the conflict, the shipping of the United States aggregated 5,539,813 tons. At sea the Federal Government was weak, the Navy being but a nominal one, and quite unable to prevent the depredations upon northern shipping by Confederate cruisers which followed the outbreak of hostilities. The success of the "Florida," "Shenandoah," and the famous "Alabama," (Lairds' No. 290) created a perfect panic among the shipowners of the North, and hasty transfers of a very large proportion of the deep-sea shipping of the United States were made to neutrals—mostly to

British subjects, as may be gathered from a perusal of the following figures for that period:

	Tons.
In 1861 the commercial shipping of the United States aggregated.....	5,539,813
In 1866 it had fallen, through the war, to.....	4,310,778
A loss of.....	1,227,035
In 1861 the shipping of the United Kingdom (exclusive of the Colonies) aggregated.....	4,359,695
In 1866 it had grown (by building and transfers from other countries) to...	5,452,862

A gain of..... 1,093,167

A large proportion of this gain was shipping transferred from United States registry to that of Great Britain.

The disastrous effects of the war upon Northern shipping is even more vividly shown by a perusal of the imports and exports at the great port of New York during that period. In 1860 the total value of imports and exports at New York, aggregated as follows:—Carried in United States vessels, \$233,893,593; carried in foreign vessels, \$149,923,149. At that time nearly double the value was carried by the home trade, but during the war the proportion steadily shifted, until 1864, towards the close of the conflict, the value of commodities carried in United States vessels was but \$74,016,600, while that carried in foreign ships had risen to \$405,390,883, or nearly six times that carried by native shipping. The editor of the "Statesmen's Year Book" for 1867, says:—"A glance at the above table will show that whereas in 1864 the greater part of both the import and export trade of New York was carried by American vessels, the latter had less than one-fifth of the trade in 1864. The transfer was mainly in favor of the shipping of the United Kingdom."

The great danger to be apprehended to a nation's commerce during a period of war may be generally summarised as follows:—

1. The destruction and capture of ships and cargoes by hostile cruisers.
2. The interruption and confusion of trade, with the consequent rise in food products and necessities, to be followed naturally by great sufferings on the part of the majority of the population.
3. The deflection of established trades to neutral ports with every likelihood of their permanent loss.
5. The paralysis of credit.