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King Cotton and the Rising Sun: The Japanese Navy's Confederate Ironclad

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Abstract

When the American Civil War ended in 1865, the United States government sold off naval vessels as the country transitioned to Reconstruction. One of those vessels, the *CSS Stonewall*, traveled to countless and unexpected locations. The *CSS Stonewall* never fought in the American Civil War as it was intended to do, but instead was destined to fight in the civil war between the Japanese shogunate and emperor as the first ironclad warship of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

King Cotton and the Rising Sun: The Japanese Navy's Confederate Ironclad

By [Alex Andrioli '18](#)

When the American Civil War ended in 1865, the United States government sold off naval vessels as the country transitioned to Reconstruction. One of those vessels, the *CSS Stonewall*, traveled to countless and unexpected locations. The *CSS Stonewall* never fought in the American Civil War as it was intended to do, but instead was destined to fight in the civil war between the Japanese shogunate and emperor as the first ironclad warship of the Imperial Japanese Navy.



The CSS Stonewall in the Washington Naval Yard in 1865. Via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

In 1868, the Tokugawa Shogun—the military leader of Japan—relinquished his power to the Meiji Emperor during Japan's civil war, known as the Boshin War. The Tokugawa family had ruled as Japan's shogunate since 1603 and oversaw the country's peace time

and isolation from the outside world for over 260 years. Japanese isolation would not last forever. In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States forcefully opened Japan to the outside world with an “open-door policy.” The shogunate was impressed by Perry’s modern “tools of war” and was determined to upgrade their navy to fit the modern world. The *CSS Stonewall* would eventually become the ship that would help Japan accelerate toward modernization and end the Japanese civil war. However, the *Stonewall* was originally intended to aid the Confederate States of America in missions such as attacking William T. Sherman’s base at Port Royal, breaking the Wilmington blockade, or striking New England ports.

The South lacked many of the resources required to make warships, so the Secretary of the Confederate Navy, Stephen Mallory, asked James Dunwoody Bulloch, the Confederacy’s top naval agent in Europe, to oversee the construction of ships in Europe. In 1863, French shipbuilder Lucien Arman offered the Confederate Navy his help in building four sloops and two ironclad rams in Bordeaux and Nantes, France. France had issued a neutrality proclamation in 1861, but Bulloch believed Emperor Napoleon III favored the Confederacy due to its cotton supply.

In the fall of 1863, the U.S. Minister to France, William Dayton, received stolen papers from the Nantes shipyard that confirmed the ships were being built for the Confederacy. The ships were completed, but in May 1864, Napoleon threatened the shipbuilder, Arman, with imprisonment if he did not find new customers for the ships. Arman sold the future *CSS Stonewall* to Denmark, but the sale was delayed due to Denmark’s ongoing war with Prussia. Once their war ended, the Danes no longer needed the ironclad. Arman and Bulloch arranged for the vessel to be sold back to the Confederacy once the ironclad reached Copenhagen and was out of the French’s control. The *CSS Stonewall* left Copenhagen in January 1865 and had to constantly stop to make repairs and avoid bad weather since the ship was designed to operate in the South’s coasts and rivers—not on the open sea.

A Union frigate, *Niagara*, and sloop, *Sacramento*, tried to blockade the *Stonewall* while in Corunna, Spain. Despite their superior fire-power, the Union ships backed-out of an engagement with the *Stonewall* due to the Confederate ironclad’s armor and the threat it posed to the Union ships’ wooden-hulls. The *CSS Stonewall* reached Havana, Cuba in May 1865 just after the American Civil War ended. The commander of the *Stonewall*, Thomas Page, sold the ironclad to Spanish authorities in order to pay off his crew and the ship was eventually handed over to the United States government.

In 1867, a Japanese purchasing mission sent by the Japanese shogun was given a tour of the Washington Navy Yard in the U.S. capital. Their tour guide brought the group’s attention to the *Stonewall*, resulting in the Japanese purchasing the ironclad. However, the U.S. government claimed neutrality in the war between the shogun and emperor and initially refused to release the ship to the shogunate. Eventually, the ironclad was released in 1869, but to the emperor’s imperial forces instead of the shogunate. *CSS Stonewall* was renamed *Kōtetsu* (meaning “iron-covered ship”) and became a

“formidable weapon” in the Meiji Emperor’s efforts to destroy the Tokugawa Shogun, specifically in the Battle of Hakodate. The *Kōtetsu* led a group of Imperial ships against shogunate forces at Hakodate and “swept away a rebel fleet and leveled the shore defenses with their guns.” The Boshin War ended in 1869 and periods of tension between Japan and China in the 1870s followed. According to a claim made by a British spy, Chinese sailors would desert rather than face the *Kōtetsu*.

CSS Stonewall made an even larger impact in Japan than it ever would have in the United States. The *Stonewall* was the first ironclad of the Imperial Japanese Navy, but there is great irony in this fact. The United States helped to advance the very navy that would cause great damage to the U.S. Navy over seventy years later during World War II. However, all irony aside, the impact of the American Civil War extended beyond United States territory—further than anyone could imagine.

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