From Shipwreck to Statecraft: the Resolute Desk and the Dis:connectivity of Maritime Salvage

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(Human) author's note:

This essay was written with the assistance of an AI language model (Claude Opus 4.6, developed by Anthropic). Neither the body text nor the bibliography has been edited by a human. Corrections, clarifications and additions were administered via chat prompts only. I conceived the article's argument, selected and provided all primary and secondary sources, defined the theoretical framework, supplied verbatim quotations from archival newspaper sources, and made all substantive editorial decisions throughout the writing process. The AI assisted in drafting prose based on the author's instructions and source materials, structuring the narrative, integrating citations, checking for unmarked direct quotations and close paraphrases against project sources, condensing the text to meet word limit, and producing a record of attributions, which ties each factual claim to a particular source. The AI also provided critical feedback on the article's structure, argument and factual accuracy, identifying weaknesses such as a misattributed secondary source and an erroneous historical actor, both of which were corrected. I have reviewed all historical claims, interpretations and theoretical arguments. The final text reflects my scholarly judgment and remains my intellectual responsibility.

Editor's note:

Each text that appears in any gd:c publication undergoes thorough editing. Virtually no submission survives untouched. In this case, however, we have opted to leave the text as it was submitted, altering only the typography and layout. As an experiment in the results of human-AI cooperation in scholarly writing, any deeper interventions would falsify the results. We therefore apologise for deviations from our house style but hope you find them as fascinating as we do. Incidentally, I have been informed that Claude demurred when asked about being credited as a co-author. Sorry, Claude, but professionalism obliges us.

In May 1854, the crew of HMS *Resolute* walked away from their ship. Trapped in Arctic ice for nearly two winters, the barque-rigged vessel – specially reinforced for polar service – had become a liability. The men trekked across the frozen sea to safety aboard other ships, leaving the *Resolute* to drift with the ice pack (Sandler 2006). It was a moment of rupture: a ship built to connect distant shores had become immobilized, abandoned, written off. On November 9, 1854, the Admiralty published a notice in the *London Gazette* asserting "a continuing right to Her Majesty's ships 'Assistance,' 'Resolute,' 'Investigator,' 'Pioneer,' and 'Intrepid,' which have been left in the Arctic Seas by their late crews" (*London Gazette*, 9 November 1854). But no salvage attempt was made.

Today, the timbers of that same ship form the Resolute Desk in the White House Oval Office – arguably the most iconic piece of presidential furniture. It features in presidential addresses, in countless photographs and documentaries, in popular fiction from novels to Hollywood movies. How Arctic disaster became diplomatic gift, and how a lost ship became a symbol of Anglo-American friendship, is a story of maritime salvage. More broadly, it offers a case study in what we might call the dis:connectivity of processes of globalization: the constant interplay between connection and disconnection, entanglement and disentanglement, that characterizes so much of globalization (Balme, Dogramaci and Wenzlhuemer 2025). Shipwreck brings rupture to connection. Salvage, I argue, brings connection to rupture.

The First Salvage: An American Gift

On September 10, 1855 – more than a year after its abandonment and some 1,200 miles from where it had been left – the *Resolute* was discovered by Captain James Buddington of the American whaling ship *George Henry*. As *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* later reported, the crew found the abandoned vessel still enclosed in ice (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 11



December 1880). Remarkably, the hull was intact, preserved by the cold that had imprisoned it.

Buddington saw opportunity where the Admiralty had seen only loss. This was salvage in its classic sense: the recovery of abandoned property from the sea, with potential profit for those bold enough to attempt it. His crew freed the *Resolute* from the ice and sailed it to New London, Connecticut. The arrival created a legal and diplomatic puzzle. Under maritime law, Buddington's crew held salvage rights and could expect substantial compensation. But the diplomatic possibilities were not lost on American businessman Henry Grinnell, who had himself sponsored Arctic expeditions. Relations between Britain and the United States remained tense in the 1850s. What if, instead of claiming the ship as salvage, the United States restored and returned it as a token of goodwill?

At Grinnell's urging, Congress purchased the *Resolute* for $40,000, had it completely refitted, and presented it to Queen Victoria as a gift from the President and people of the United States (White House Historical Association). When the restored vessel arrived in England, it was greeted with enthusiasm. The *Resolute* became a symbol of Anglo-American friendship precisely because it had been rescued from disaster.

Here we see salvage operating not merely as an economic practice, but as a diplomatic one. The recovery created new connections – political, symbolic, cultural – from the

Fig. 01
ChatGPT's rendering of a woodworker planing Resolute's planks.

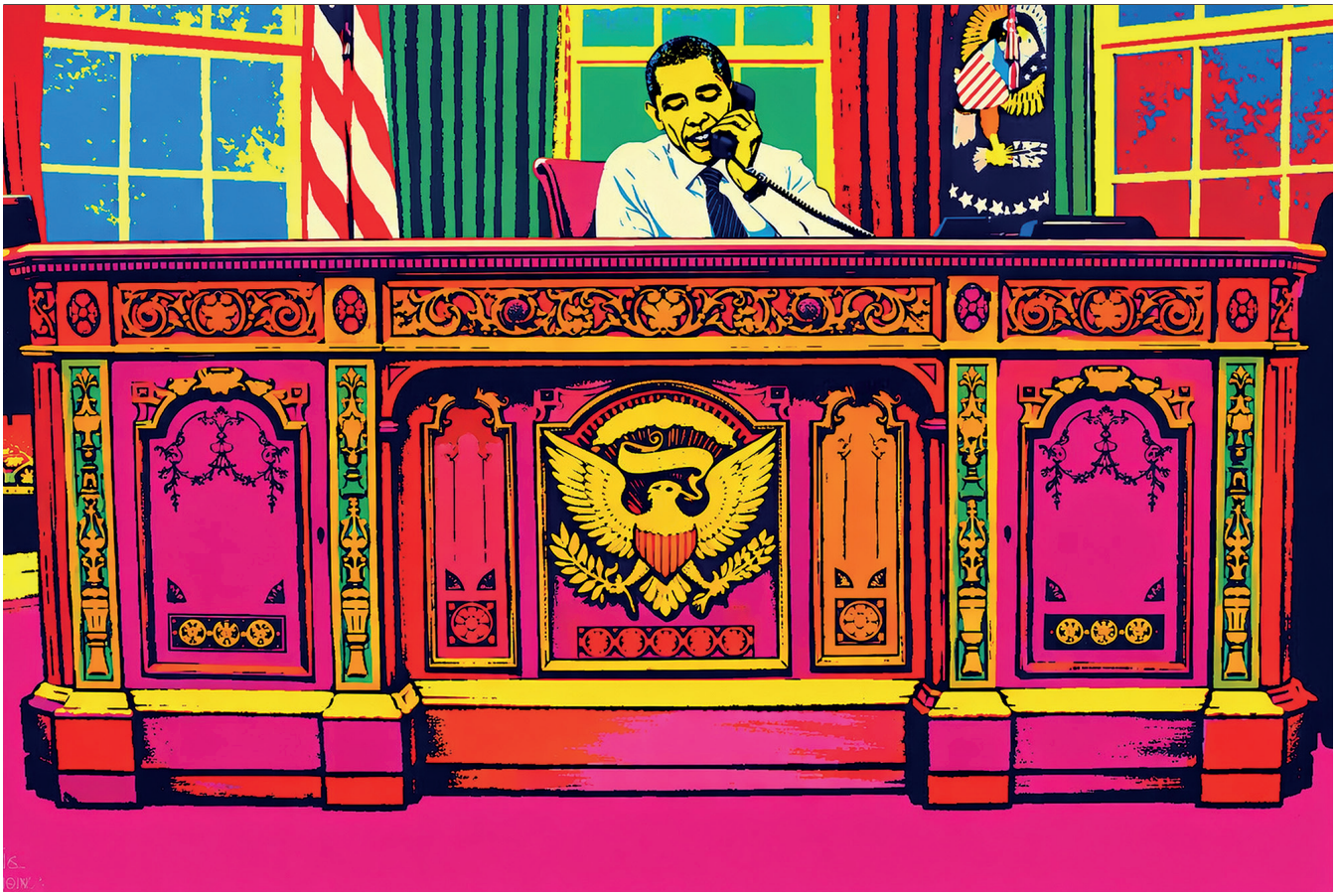
disconnection of the ship's abandonment. The vessel became more valuable as a token of friendship than it ever was as a working ship. As contemporary newspapers recognized, the *Resolute* had become a vessel with a history – and that history now included not just Arctic exploration, but also international cooperation.

The Second Salvage: From Ship to Desk

For twenty-three years, HMS *Resolute* served in the Royal Navy, though it never again ventured into Arctic waters. By 1879, the ship was deemed unfit for service and sent to the breaker's yard at Chatham Dockyard. Ship breaking was and remains an essential practice in maritime economies, recycling valuable materials that would otherwise be lost (Stammers 2005). As the *London Daily Telegraph* reported, "the government surveyor pronounced the fatal sentence that the old wanderer must be broken up" (*London Daily Telegraph*, 18 June 1879).

Yet the timbers of the *Resolute* were recognized as more than mere oak. They carried a story. On Queen Victoria's behalf, William Evenden, a workman at the Chatham dockyard, was commissioned to construct a "secretaire" from the ship's timbers. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that the desk was "made of live oak, weighs 1800 pounds, is elaborately carved, and altogether presents a magnificent specimen of workmanship" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1880). *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* offered a more detailed description, noting carved medallion portraits of Queen Victoria and the President on the front panels, Arctic subjects in relief on the side panels, and "busts of celebrated Arctic explorers" supporting the cornices (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 11 December 1880).

On November 23, 1880, the desk was formally presented to President Hayes (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1880). A brass plaque affixed to the desk records its journey, noting how the ship was "discovered and extricated" by Buddington and how the table was presented "as a memorial of the courtesy and loving kindness which dictated the offer of the gift of the 'Resolute'" (White House Historical Association, "Treasures"; also quoted in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 November 1880). Through successive acts of salvage – first of the ship itself, then of its materials – the oak timbers that had endured Arctic ice became instruments of state. If the first salvage had turned maritime disaster into diplomatic opportunity, the second turned decommissioned timber into a material vessel of historical memory.



Dis:connectivity and the Charged Object

What makes salvaged objects particularly fascinating is how they accumulate meaning. Unlike newly manufactured goods, salvaged materials carry their histories with them – they become material charged with a strong immaterial narrative. The Resolute Desk bears witness to Arctic expeditions, to the rescue by American whalers, to nineteenth-century diplomacy. Each president who has used it has added another layer: Franklin D. Roosevelt had a panel added to conceal his leg braces; John F. Kennedy's young son was famously photographed playing beneath it (White House Historical Association). Most recently, in February 2025, Elon Musk's four-year-old son X Æ A-Xii added a layer of his own – reportedly wiping his nose on the desk during a televised White House visit, prompting President Trump to have it "lightly refinished" (Trump, Truth Social, 19 February 2025). A piece of oak from the *Resolute* carries symbolic, historical, and diplomatic value far exceeding its weight as timber. This is why Gordon Brown's 2009 gift to Barack Obama – a pen holder made from HMS *Gannet*, an anti-slavery patrol vessel – followed the same logic.

The Resolute Desk exemplifies the idea of "dis:connectivity." As Balme, Dogramaci and Wenzlhuemer argue, "disentanglement,

Fig. 02
ChatGPT's rendering of Barack Obama working at the Resolute desk.

unrealised connections and exclusion are not the opposite of interconnectedness, but central, formative components of it" (Balme, Dogramaci and Wenzlhuemer 2025, 2). Dis:connectivity captures the mutually constitutive relationship between global integration, disintegration and the absence of connections. The same holds for maritime salvage. Ships are central enablers of global entanglements; when a ship is lost, these connections are severed. Yet salvage creates new connections from precisely these ruptures.

This is the dis:connective character of salvage: it operates in the space between breakdown and renewal. Salvage does not simply reverse rupture – it creates *new* connections, often quite different from those that were broken. The *Resolute* never returned to Arctic exploration; instead, its materials became diplomatic instruments. Without the disconnection of abandonment, there would be no opportunity for the reconnection of salvage and return. Disconnection and connection are not opposites but exist in a dialectical relationship – each is, as it were, unthinkable without the other (Balme, Dogramaci and Wenzlhuemer 2025).

The *Resolute* case also reveals the multiple dimensions at work in any salvage operation. The ship's recovery began as an economic calculation – Buddington stood to gain from salvage rights – before it became a legal matter (ownership under maritime law), a diplomatic gesture (Congress purchasing and returning the vessel), and ultimately a symbolic act (the timber recast as embodiment of friendship). Each stage allowed the material to be transformed and revalued within a different framework of meaning.

The Resolute Desk is far from unique. Bronze cannons from HMS *Royal George*, sunk at Portsmouth in 1782, were melted down and cast into Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square – connecting naval disaster to national memorialization. Timbers from USS *Chesapeake*, captured by HMS *Shannon* during the War of 1812 and broken up at Portsmouth in 1819, were used to construct the Chesapeake Mill at Wickham, Hampshire – a watermill whose very dimensions were dictated by the ship's deck beams. And in a particularly striking example, steel from warships scuttled in Scapa Flow after the First World War was raised decades later because, produced before the nuclear detonations of 1945, it was free of the radioactive contamination that atmospheric testing had introduced into all post-war steel. This "low-background steel" found use in Geiger counters and medical instruments.

As Shane Boyle has argued, salvage is fundamentally a practice of loss prevention: "Salvaging is one way that capitalism transforms loss into reward" (Boyle 2023, 44). Maritime salvage thus offers humanities scholars a productive lens for understanding how networks respond to disruption, how actors transform disaster into opportunity, and how material objects accumulate meaning across layers of history. The Resolute Desk, crafted from twice-

salvaged timbers, embodies these dynamics – Arctic oak that once drifted through polar ice now bearing the weight of executive orders, presidential addresses, and the occasional four-year-old's fingerprints.

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