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THE UNITED STATES AND THE BERLIN
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1884 – 1885

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Abstract

This paper hopes to help to increase the understanding of American historical involvement in African affairs by focusing on the 1884 – 85 Berlin Conference on Africa. It points out that the United States not only led the way in recognizing King Leopold’s claims on the Congo, it also shows that the United States influenced the activities of Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck with regard to events in Africa. The United States became fully involved in the proceedings at Berlin in order to protect its perceived actual and mostly potential interests in Africa. In the effort to protect these interests the United States affected some of the decisions that were taken at Berlin. Although the United States did not ratify the treaty, because of changes in domestic politics, it continued to believe in the viability of the agreements reached at Berlin.

In the post Civil War period, Americans concentrated on industrial expansion which was facilitated by belief that social and political stability were necessary for commerce. To protect and encourage expansion, therefore, they sought to minimize and avoid conflicts among white people everywhere. Secretary of State William Henry Seward, who served Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson, for example, endorsed the return of white supremacy in the South as a worthwhile price for building an American commercial empire. The interests of black people were therefore to be sacrificed in order to have peace in the white community and to promote Republican commercial interests.

To advance commercial interests among whites, Republicans ignored, and in some cases encouraged, atrocities against blacks. In case the Southerners failed to notice the evolving spirit, prominent men made effort to let them know of the desire of the Republicans to have the support of white supremacists. In justifying his neglect of black interests in the South, President Rutherford B. Hayes stated in 1880 that he had wanted to ‘restore confidence in the South in the justice and goodwill of a Republican Administration.’ Under President Benjamin Harrison, wrote Colonel Charles W. Wooley in December 1888 to a Louisiana planter, the Southerners would not be ‘unduly troubled. . . about the claims of

the gentlemen of African descent. Wooley was one of Harrison’s advisors. A more direct appeal to Southerners came from John A. Kasson, an Iowa politician who served as minister to Vienna and Berlin under the administrations of Hayes and Chester Arthur. Claiming that blacks as a whole were unfit to vote, Kasson encouraged white Kentuckians to ‘do as you please about the right of suffrage in your state.’ Kasson best represented this desire to maintain white harmony and to promote American commerce whether in the United States or in Africa.

In his attempts to promote and protect commerce, Kasson became involved in African affairs and became influential in subsequent developments. He had long observed European interest in Central Africa and had become instrumental in persuading Secretary of State Frederick Frelinghuysen to support American involvement in Africa. Not willing to see white men fighting over special privileges in Africa, he had welcomed German Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck’s call for a conference on Africa in Berlin in 1884. Bismarck’s initiative, Kasson believed, would avert ‘further strife, and even warlike collisions, in the remarkable struggle now going on between the commercial rival powers for advantages in the African trade.”

Protection of commerce, whether actual or potential, was a major concern for the United States at the Berlin Conference whose convening it had actually triggered. American role in the convening of the conference can be traced to a close relationship between Belgian King Leopold II and Henry S. Sanford, American minister to Brussels in the presidencies of Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson. While serving as minister, Sanford had become privy to Leopold’s growing interest in Central Africa. To Leopold, Sanford was precisely the kind of promoter that he needed in creating an empire in Africa because Sanford was well connected in the United States. Among Sanford’s friends upon whom he could call for assistance were important businessmen and politicians including Presidents Ulysses S. Grant and Chester A. Arthur.

When Leopold formed the African International Association in 1877, he appointed Sanford one of the four executive committee members; Sanford began his work immediately. It was Sanford who, in 1878, offered Henry Morton Stanley a job with the Association and sent him to Africa to collect treaties. Stanley, a correspondent for the New York Herald who had first gone to Africa to cover an expected British invasion of Ethiopia in 1869, had acquired fame by tracking down a Scottish traveller and missionary in Central Africa — David Livingstone. Besides hiring Stanley, Sanford mounted a widespread campaign to persuade the United States to recognize the Association. In 1879 he recommended that Commodore Robert Shufeldt visit the Congo. In 1881 and 1882 he advised Secretaries of State James L. Blaine and Frederick Frelinghuysen to oppose European monopolistic claims in Central Africa by promoting free trade in the Congo and by sending a consul to that region. He entertained President Arthur in his Florida mansion in April 1883, and in June he sent the president a letter urging that the United States recognize Stanley’s
activities in Africa on behalf of the Association. In December 1883, Arthur declared that the United States would not be indifferent to events in the Congo. In itself, however, Arthur’s endorsement lacked teeth.

Having received Arthur’s blessings, Sanford then attracted Senatorial support by appealing to racism and economic greed. Alabama Senator John T. Morgan, an influential member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who wanted to annex Cuba and the Philippines, liked the idea of the Congo becoming a haven for former slaves as well as a part of the growing American economic empire. Morgan pressured the Senate to pass a resolution supporting Sanford’s activities. In February 1884, while noting that Arthur supported the Association, Morgan introduced a resolution in the Senate calling on the president to secure ‘unrestricted freedom of access and traffic to our citizens in the legitimate enterprises in the Congo Basin from its mouth to its sources.’ The president could do this by recognizing ‘the flag of the African International Association’ and by ‘denying rights of sovereignty and of intervention by any power . . . to the Mouth of the Congo, the gate-way of Central Africa.’ In April 1884, the Senate officially advised the president ‘to recognize the flag of the International Association of the Congo as that of a friendly Government.’ It also called for ‘the appointment of a commercial agent for the Congo Basin.’ Arthur willingly complied with the Senate wishes.

The United States’ recognition of Leopold’s Association as a friendly government provoked a series of diplomatic activities in European capitals leading to the convening of the Berlin Conference on Africa. American intervention had actually interrupted an intensifying European competition for territorial control in Africa. Portugal had reacted to Stanley’s treaty making travels in Central Africa by successfully appealing to Britain for assistance in upholding its claims in the region. The French, though also reacting to Stanley’s activities by laying claims to the territory north of the Congo River, became apprehensive about the Anglo-Portuguese entente. To counter the London-Lisbon alliance, Paris followed Washington’s example and recognized the Association. The wily German Chancellor Bismarck, who disliked British quisiness over German claims to Southwest Africa, also followed the American lead and recognized the Association. Believing that an Association controlled Central Africa was better than one under British rule, Bismarck induced the French to cosponsor a conference on the Congo. In this regard, Berlin and Washington had identical interests in recognizing the Association and minimizing competition in the area. Bismarck admitted to Kasson, ‘we have followed your example, and recognized the Flag of the Association.

The United States participated in the Berlin Conference, fully aware that the purpose of the conference was to agree on the doctrine of free trade and navigation in rivers Congo and Niger and to define methods of annexing territories that had ‘not yet been subjected to the flag of any civilized state.’ For political and practical reasons, Americans restricted themselves to issues of
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avoiding war and of having free access to African resources and markets. The United States did not want to administer any territory, as demonstrated in its reluctance to bear any direct responsibility for Liberia, a little American implant in West Africa which Frelinghuysen described as 'an offshoot of this country.' But despite its unwillingness to bear responsibility for administering a territory, the United States could completely ignore constant friction between Liberia on one hand and Britain and France, on the other. Similarly in Madagascar, in 1882, the French had bullied their way militarily and economically and had displaced American influence, while the United States had tried to do its best to avoid conflict with France. To find a solution that would minimize such frictions and American political involvement while preserving potential economic interests in Africa, therefore, was enough reason for Americans to be at Berlin. Most importantly, Frelinghuysen wrote, the United States reserved for itself 'the right to decline to accept the conclusions of the conference.'

At the conference, the United States achieved its goals of giving Congo a commercial definition, as opposed to a geographical one, and then in having the delegates declare the region a free trade zone. The Congo Basin, according to Kasson, covered the whole equatorial region of Africa stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Oceans. Arguing that the issue at hand was one of commerce rather than geography, Kasson claimed that Americans had always sent their cargo to the Upper Congo through Zanzibar. 'Our proposed regime of free commerce,' he stated, 'should be extended there over the country embracing all lines of approach from the Indian Ocean, which are now, . . . free of foreign jurisdiction.' With Germany's support, the Conference accepted the American proposal and thereby enabled Kasson to report, 'we have vastly increased the territory to be included, embracing all equatorial Africa, from ocean to ocean.'

The United States also succeeded, mainly as a way of avoiding wars in Africa, in obtaining the recognition of the International Africa Association's control of the Congo region. Kasson, once again supported by Bismarck, wanted the conference to declare Tropical Africa to be a neutral area not subject to expropriation. Stanley's travels, he said, had revealed the existence of 'no jurisdiction claimed by any representative of whitemen . . . no dominant flag of a civilized power, and no sovereignty exercised or claimed except that of indigenous tribes.' To avoid 'dangerous rivalries of conflicting nationalities' and the possibility of Central Africa 'being so appropriated as to exclude it from free intercourse with a large part of the civilized world,' Kasson recommended that the conference accept the Association's flag. The Association, although it necessarily used force to subjugate Africans, he argued, had established an effective government that protected every country's commercial interests and free access to the region. Recognizing the Association, he said, meant that 'blacks will learn from it (the Association) that the civilization and dominion of the white

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man means for them peace and freedom and the development of useful commerce, free to the world. As a result of Kasson’s presentations, the other powers agreed to accept the American concept of neutrality in Central Africa. In case of a war, the delegates decided, colonies would be treated as non-belligerent states and commerce would not be interfered with. They promised not to extend their wars to Africa and to mediate any future differences that might arise out of Africa. The United States thus obtained one of its objectives of making the Europeans agree not to fight in Africa; it did not succeed in making the Europeans to forego the expropriation of territories.

The United States did not ratify the treaty signed at Berlin, mainly because there was a different administration in Washington. Opponents of the treaty attacked, and continued to attack, American participation in the conference as a violation of American diplomatic tradition. In the election campaign of 1884, Governor Grover Cleveland of New York, the Democratic presidential candidate who had anti-imperialist tendencies, won. Once in the White House, Cleveland failed to submit the treaty to the Senate for ratification. He failed to submit it despite appeals from supporters of the treaty like Kasson and Morgan. Kasson and Morgan had little success in defending the conference. No longer emphasizing the shipment of blacks to the Congo, although he continued to hope that it could be done, the Alabama senator (Morgan) defended the agreement as protecting American real and potential commercial interests in the Congo Basin. It was all in vain. Frelinghuysen had pointed out that Washington had reserved the right to reject the results of the conference; Cleveland chose to exercise that right.

American participation in the Berlin Conference gave the United States an opportunity to protect its actual and potential commercial interests in Tropical Africa. It was at Berlin that Washington first expounded on what would later be termed ‘open door’ policy which in the 1880s applied specifically to Africa. Henceforth, as Secretary of State Edward R. Stettinius remarked in 1945, the United States’ policy would be one of ‘open door’ and of providing ‘equality of opportunity for Americans’ in Africa. In addition, Americans, being already tired because of the Civil War, did not want to see white people killing each other over African-Americans or territories in Africa. The agreement to avoid wars that could arise out of commercial competition and that could disrupt free trade in Africa was therefore a big American achievement. During World War I, the Germans unsuccessfully reminded the Americans that they had an obligation to stop the British from attacking German interests in East Africa because the United States was responsible for the particular part of the Berlin agreement. Although the Woodrow Wilson administration ignored Germany’s claim by pointing out that the United States had not ratified the treaty, the agreement had been a remarkable undertaking. As in the United States, that agreement among white officials had been at the expense of black people whose subjugation,
Kasson had claimed, would benefit the world. Washington's failure to ratify the treaty, due to a change in the administration at the White House, did not affect its belief that Tropical Africa was a free trade zone.

About the Author

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Notes

15. Quote in Younger, John A. Kasson, p. 331; see also Kasson to Frelinghuysen, November 15, 1884, Doc. No. 196, SEC VIII, 23; Sanford to Frelinghuysen, January 14, 1885, ibid., p. 159.
22. Kasson to Frelinghuysen, November 24, 1884, ibid., p. 43.
23. Kasson to Frelinghuysen, November 26, 1884, ibid., p. 44.
24. Kasson to Frelinghuysen, November 24, 1884, ibid., pp. 43 – 44.
30. Stettinius to Truman, April 16, 1945, enclosing State Department Policy Manual, Truman Papers, PSF, Box 159, ‘Cabinet: Secretary of State; Policy Manual, April 16, 1945.’ (The Truman Papers are located in the Harry S. Truman Library at Independence, Missouri, USA).