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## American Diplomats and the Franco-Prussian War: Perceptions from Paris and Berlin

M. Patricia Dougherty

*Department of History, Dominican University of California, [patricia.dougherty@dominican.edu](mailto:patricia.dougherty@dominican.edu)*

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**Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service  
Georgetown University**



# **AMERICAN DIPLOMATS AND THE FRANCO- PRUSSIAN WAR**

## **Perceptions From Paris And Berlin**

**by Sister Patricia Dougherty, O. P.**

**Foreword by Dean Peter F. Krogh**

THE INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF DIPLOMACY, established by the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, focuses on the practical, concrete fashion in which diplomacy is carried out. It builds upon the School's teaching program in diplomacy and will make active contributions to both study and practice in this field through occasional papers and case studies by senior practitioners and through public affairs programs such as the Jit Trainor Award Ceremony.

Inquiries should be addressed to:

**The Honorable Ellsworth Bunker  
Institute for the Study of Diplomacy  
School of Foreign Service  
Georgetown University  
Washington, D.C. 20057  
(202) 625-2784**

**American Diplomats  
And The Franco-  
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# *Foreword*

by Peter F. Krogh

Dean, School of Foreign Service

The Institute for the Study of Diplomacy seeks to improve today's skills for the practice of tomorrow's diplomacy by the examination of case studies of the diplomatic process. All of the Institute's publications so far have dealt with relatively recent diplomatic transactions occurring within the author's lifetime. Why then the publication of a dissertation on diplomatic dealings over a century ago?

The relevance of Sister Dougherty's thesis to our concerns stems from the duties of diplomats which she discusses and which, upon examination, appear to have been not very different during the Franco-Prussian war from what they are today: Political reporting, analysis, judicious forecasting, policy recommendation, protection of American citizens, trade promotion, consular duties, representation and protection of foreign nationals as "protecting power". All these factors are present (not necessarily in terms of performance, but in terms of the requirement for them) in this analysis of the work of the American ministers in Paris and Berlin during the Franco-Prussian war.

The story is instructive not so much because of the excellence of the performance of those American representatives but because it is easier, perhaps, to see deficiencies in their appointment and in their performance when they are viewed in a larger perspective. The two ministers, as Sister Dougherty points out in her conclusions, "served Washington inadequately in very different ways." There are things to be learned from those inadequacies.

Both American ministers were appointed because of political debts owed to them by Presidents. Elihu B. Washburne had been Secretary of State (for five days) but had proved unsuited to that task because of a lack of stamina, tact and flexibility. He was sent to Paris instead, perhaps in the belief that those deficiencies didn't matter there. Known in the Congress as the "Watchdog of the Treasury" because of his penny-pinching, he did not telegraph his most timely dispatches about the war but sent them by boat instead. He was a fierce defender of certain American rights. If he was guilty of errors, they were errors more of omission than of commission.

By contrast, George Bancroft, the American minister to Prussia, not only had previous diplomatic experience but also was believed eminently suited for his post by virtue of having studied in Germany and being the author of a monumental work of history which earned him immediate entrée to the highest social and intellectual circles in Berlin. His trouble was that he could



see no wrong in his host country. Instead, he became an eager defender of its every action—a phenomenon known today as “localitis” or “clientitis” and bemoaned in some American ambassadors who, the complaint goes, behave more like the ambassadors *to* the United States *of* their host countries than as ambassadors *of* the United States *to* those countries.

There is much to be learned by analogy from this unpretentious study. How transient, for instance, are ideological grounds for sympathy with foreign countries, and how frail is ideology as a basis for the determination of national interest! When the Franco-Prussian war began, the American diplomatic establishment tended to sympathize with Prussia, which was seeking to unify Germany (along federal lines patterned, it was thought, after the model of the United States) and to desire the defeat of France, then deemed by some to be a decadent and imperial power. Within half a year, France was a republic and Germany an empire, with the perceived danger of expansiveness shifting from one to the other.

The study of “Perceptions from Paris and Berlin” can be read on several levels—as a lesson from the past, as an analysis of diplomatic performance, as a reminder of the permanence of certain problems and requirements of diplomacy, as a cautionary tale, as a contribution to the study of European history and American diplomacy of the period, and also as sheer entertainment. I insist on the last element, which should not be regarded as in any way derogatory. If we can learn while being entertained, so much the better for us.

In this soberly written disquisition, the reader will find traces of the human condition with all its vulnerability and pathos—as for instance in the story of the fierce defense of the right of the American minister in Paris to receive mail, including newspapers, during the siege of that city, a right that he safeguarded but then abandoned because, to that sobersided American, it was *“too much to be the only person in a city of two millions of people receiving any outside news.”* Or the story of how the American minister in Berlin, upon receiving unwelcome instructions to deliver a protest, managed to execute them as perfunctorily as possible—presumably because he thought the host country was unjustly criticized and also because his “good relations” with the host government appeared to him more important than reflecting accurately the views and temper of his own government.

The School of Foreign Service owes a debt of gratitude to two professors of the Department of History of Georgetown University: the late Dagmar Horna-Perman who initially sponsored and influenced the subject and outline of this study, and Thomas T. Helde who directed the study after the death of Dr. Horna-Perman and molded it into a form that makes the relevance of its lessons to contemporary diplomacy more apparent. This publication represents a first attempt of the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy to reach out and avail itself of the richness of resources in other departments of

Georgetown University which, in their own way, also have lessons to contribute about the conduct of diplomacy.

Thank you, Sister Patricia Dougherty, for having provided us with a study that, across a gulf of over a hundred years, puts to us pointed lessons about the “conduct and misconduct of foreign affairs,” old lessons which speak to us with fresh relevance. You have made a contribution to the study of diplomacy which would perhaps be more difficult to assimilate if it related to a more recent conflict. And thank you, Professor Thomas T. Helde, for having shepherded this study through various stages of production to the point where it is a most fitting “case study” for the Institute’s program of studies of diplomacy.



# Introduction

In July 1870, war between Prussia and France erupted over the candidature of a German prince to the Spanish throne, with far-reaching consequences for the balance of power in Europe. Six weeks later, the German army decisively defeated the French at Sedan and captured the French emperor, Napoleon III. Although this victory precipitated the collapse of the Second French Empire, it did not end the war. Only after a four-month siege of Paris did the French surrender to the Germans on January 28, 1871. Between this date and the signing of the peace treaty at Frankfurt on May 10, both France and Germany underwent far-reaching changes in their governmental structure: the war and its aftermath created the Third French Republic and the Second German Reich.

The outbreak of the war has been attributed to the machinations of Otto von Bismarck, Prussian chancellor, who wished to create a united Germany under Prussian hegemony.<sup>1</sup> He was a careful and clever man, a consummate tactician who used events as they occurred according to how he saw them fit into his plan. The proximate cause of the Franco-Prussian War, the publication of the edited "Ems telegram" in July, 1870, is an example of his well-calculated action.

The events which led to the "Ems telegram" began in early 1870, when Bismarck encouraged the candidature of Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen to the Spanish throne—vacant since the Spanish revolution in 1868.<sup>2</sup> Although Leopold had already twice refused, he accepted a renewed Spanish offer in June, 1870. At that time, King Wilhelm of Prussia, as head of the House of Hohenzollern, approved the candidacy.

What Bismarck intended in promoting the candidacy is a matter of historical debate. He must have recognized that a Spanish government sympathetic to Germany would be a military asset. In the event of war, the French would have to protect the Spanish frontier, and thus one to two of their army corps could not be employed against Germany. Further, Bismarck knew that Napoleon III would object to a German prince on the

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<sup>1</sup>The events leading to the declaration of war are examined in the following works: Georges Bonnin, ed., *Bismarck and the Hohenzollern Candidature for the Spanish Throne: The Documents in the German Diplomatic Archives*, trans. Isabella M. Massey (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957); Robert Howard Lord, *The Origins of the War of 1870: New Documents from the German Archives* (1924; reprint ed., New York: Russell & Russell, 1966); Lawrence D. Steefel, *Bismarck, the Hohenzollern Candidacy and the Origins of the Franco-German War of 1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

<sup>2</sup>Bismarck to King of Prussia, March 9, 1870, Bonnin, pp. 68–73.

Spanish throne. He felt that this objection would further his aim, the unification of Germany, because a bellicose France would encourage the southern German states to align themselves with the North German Confederation led by Prussia. (Austria had been knocked out of a role in German politics in 1866, when it had been defeated by Prussia.) Possibly Bismarck hoped for war with France. His memoirs provide evidence that he felt such a war to be inevitable, but these were written more than twenty years after the event. He wrote:

I took it as assured that war with France would necessarily have to be waged on the road to our further national development, for our development at home as well as the extension beyond the Main, and that we must keep this eventuality in sight in all our domestic as well as in our foreign relations.<sup>3</sup>

For more than a week following the news of Leopold's acceptance there was the possibility of war. The French protested the candidacy and sent Count Vincent Benedetti, the French Ambassador in Berlin, to Ems to induce the King of Prussia—there taking the waters—to secure the withdrawal of Leopold's acceptance. Since Prince Leopold, on an Alpine excursion, was unaware of the crisis and could not be reached, Prince Karl Anton informed King Wilhelm of July 12 that he renounced the Spanish throne on behalf of his son. King Wilhelm, a peaceful man, received this news joyfully and told Benedetti that the answer from the Sigmaringens would officially reach him on the morning of July 13. Bismarck was disappointed when all seemed to be settled amicably. His concern was always for Prussia's prestige, and he worried about what effect the Prussian retreat would have on the south German states whom he wished to include in a united Germany.

Napoleon III and his Foreign Minister Antoine Duc de Gramont were not fully content with the Prussian retreat and instructed Ambassador Benedetti to secure a promise that there would be no future candidacy of the Hohenzollern prince. The question of the candidature had become secondary to the broader point of obtaining "satisfaction" from Prussia.

At Ems, Benedetti thrice pressed the demand for a future commitment on the part of King Wilhelm. The King politely refused and informed Benedetti that because the withdrawal of Leopold from the Spanish candidacy had been secured, he felt the problem was over and there was no need for further discussion on this topic. Heinrich Abeken, who was staying at Ems as the liaison between the king and the North German foreign office in Berlin, drafted and sent a report of the conversations that had taken place between the Prussian king and the French ambassador. This became the famous Ems

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<sup>3</sup>Otto von Bismarck, *Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Bro., 1899), II:57.

dispatch of July 13, 1870. Bismarck edited it so that both Benedetti and the King appeared to have been treated discourteously: Count Benedetti because of the king's refusal to talk with the French ambassador and King Wilhelm because of the "impertinent" demand for future guarantees. It was important for Bismarck that Prussia be viewed as the victim of an overbearing France in order to be sure that the south German states would honor their military treaties with the North German Confederation, which provided that the forces of these states would come under the command of the Prussian army in the event of a "German" war.

In France a furor followed the publication of the doctored telegram. On July 14, the French cabinet and Emperor Napoleon III decided to prepare for war to avenge their honor. On July 15, the *Corps Législatif* enthusiastically voted war credits. The French mobilized their forces, and later that day the North German Confederation mobilized. On the 16th, the south German states mobilized. And on July 19, the French chargé d'affaires in Berlin, Georges Le Sourd, delivered the declaration of war to Bismarck.

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Although historians have studied the Franco-Prussian War from the viewpoint of its military consequences, of its importance in the national histories of France and Germany, and of its significance in the shifting balance of power in European history, little has been written about how contemporary non-participants perceived the war and its issues. This paper focuses on perceptions of the Franco-Prussian War by the American diplomatic establishment: who was seen as responsible for the war; how Bismarck's aims for German unification were interpreted; and how the American ministers to the belligerents sought to implement American neutrality. An exploration of these perceptions sheds light on the American diplomatic system of the time and on Bismarck's negotiating skill with respect to the neutrals. The primary focus of this study is on the American minister in Paris, Elihu Benjamin Washburne, and the American minister in Berlin, George Bancroft, with additional insights from other Americans assigned to the diplomatic missions.



# *I. Responsibility For War:*

## *Reports (And Lack Thereof) From Paris*

The swift outbreak of hostilities between Prussia and France suddenly dominated what had begun as a peaceful summer. Of the major figures in this study, only the United States minister to the Prussian court was at his post in Berlin. Bismarck was at Varzin, his remote estate in Pomerania; the Prussian king was still taking the waters at Ems; his wife was at Coblenz; and Benedetti, the French Ambassador to Prussia, was at Wildbad. The American minister to France was enjoying the pleasures of Carlsbad.

Elihu Benjamin Washburne had been appointed by President Grant to the post of American Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to France in March, 1869. During the Civil War, Washburn as a congressman had recommended that Grant be commissioned first a colonel and later a brigadier general of the Illinois volunteers. When Grant became President, he reciprocated with the gratifying appointment of Washburne as Secretary of State. This appointment turned out to be unsuitable, however, because of Washburne's frail health and because of his temperament. The office of Secretary of State required stamina, tact, and flexibility, all of which Washburne lacked. Washburne experienced frequent bouts of illness and could be belligerent and stubborn.<sup>1</sup> After only five days, Washburne resigned his cabinet post and accepted the responsibilities of Minister to France, which post he held until the autumn of 1877.<sup>2</sup>

Born in Maine in 1816, Washburne was the third of eleven children of a family which encouraged public service. Four of the eight sons served in Congress; two became diplomats, Elihu in France and Charles in Paraguay; and two were state governors. After attending Harvard Law School, Wash-

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<sup>1</sup>According to Russell Nelson, Washburne tended to exaggerate his suffering and enjoyed complaining about his maladies. This is probably true, for he survived remarkably well both the long hours of work and strain in trying to protect the citizens of the North German Confederation and the rigors of living through the siege in Paris with its accompanying scarcity of food and fuel. Russell K. Nelson, "The Early Life and Congressional Career of Elihu B. Washburne" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Dakota, 1953), p. 516. According to Samuel Flagg Bemis, an example of Washburne's unsuitable temperament was his persistent advocacy of President Johnson's impeachment. That Washburne was not cowed by anyone will be seen later in his dealing with Bismarck. Samuel Flagg Bemis, ed., *The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy* (1928): reprint ed., New York: Pageant Book Company, 1958, Vol. 7-8: 120-1.

<sup>2</sup>Francis Xavier Gannon, "A Study of Elihu Benjamin Washburne: American Minister to France during the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune" (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 1950), pp. 13-34.



burne opened a law office in Galena, Illinois. Twelve years later (1852), he won his first election to Congress and remained there for sixteen years as a Radical Whig, earning a reputation for being an opponent of spenders and schemers and receiving the nickname "Watchdog of the Treasury."

Serving in France he continued the struggle against spenders and schemers. In the summer of 1860, he alerted Frenchmen to the fact that the American government was not backing the Memphis and El Paso Railroad bonds, as the advertisements claimed. Thus, Washburne helped protect American prestige when the railroad went bankrupt in 1870.

The traits that made Washburne "Watchdog of the Treasury" also carried over into his attitude toward expenditures in the Paris legation. In one of his first dispatches to the State Department after the outbreak of war, he expressed his concern about the expense of telegraphic communications and requested guidelines on when he should use this fast method of communication.<sup>3</sup> Later during the war, he fretted about the increased expenses of the legation due to the amount of work required to protect the citizens of the North German Confederation.

In early summer 1870, although Franco-Prussian relations had recently been cool, Washburne felt no special alarm about developments. After all, on June 30 Premier Emile Ollivier had told the Chamber of Deputies: "At no period has the maintenance of peace seemed better assured."<sup>4</sup> Having been granted a leave of absence, Washburne left on July 2 for his vacation in Carlsbad where he hoped to spend six or seven weeks. Colonel Wickham Hoffman remained as chargé d'affaires in Paris.

Hoffman, born in New York City in 1821, was a lawyer and an army officer and had only recently become a diplomat. He had graduated from Harvard in 1841 and had set up a legal practice in New York. After his military service during the Civil War on the staff of several different generals, he was appointed to the post of assistant secretary of the American Legation at Paris. In the following year, he was promoted to first secretary and remained in that capacity until 1874, when he took the corresponding job in London.

It was Hoffman who alerted Washburne and Secretary of State Hamilton Fish that a crisis was developing in Paris over the news of Prince Leopold's acceptance of the Spanish throne. Hoffman described the furor that arose over a possible Hohenzollern in Spain. "The journals of all shades are

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<sup>3</sup>The transatlantic cable connected Europe and America in 1867. Count Otto zu Stolberg-Wernigerode, *Germany and the United States of America during the Era of Bismarck*, trans. Otto E. Lessing (Reading, Pennsylvania: Henry Janssen Foundation, 1937), p. 109.

<sup>4</sup>Ollivier quoted in Michael Eliot Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871* (1960; reprint ed., London: Fontana Library, 1967), p. 48.

unanimous that such an insult and peril to France cannot be tolerated." He reported that the government journals blamed Bismarck, who hated France and desired a unified Germany under Prussian hegemony. Hoffman analyzed the negative influence of Bismarck on the French in a colorful manner: "He [Bismarck] has but to shake a red flag in their faces, and they lower their heads, shut their eyes, and rush furiously at it."<sup>5</sup> Hoffman explained why France would react in such a manner. France had suffered frustration at the hands of Germany. In 1866, Prussia's war against Austria had surprised France and was perceived as a challenge to French supremacy in Europe. Further, Bismarck had successfully negotiated secret treaties with the southern states of Germany. Hoffman asserted that these previous blows to French prestige had embittered Emperor Napoleon III. Though stating that he feared for the peace of Europe, Hoffman evidently did not perceive the full significance of the crisis. Due to the policy of cost-consciousness set by the Minister, this dispatch dated July 8 was sent through regular mail and did not arrive in the State Department until July 21, two days after war was declared.

The situation changed, however, within a week. Hoffman became more alarmed with the events in Europe because of the publication of the Ems telegram. On July 14, he wrote that there was "less chance for the preservation of peace in Europe than . . . a week ago."<sup>6</sup> But he still relied on the regular mail to communicate with the State Department. Hoffman, who had acquired some experience in diplomacy and had been in Paris for four years, was an astute observer and recognized the importance of the Ems telegram as the determining factor for the French decision to declare war. However, his report did not reach Washington in time to be of any help to the U.S. Government in assessing the situation. (It arrived by the same mail as the dispatch of July 18). In addition, Washburne's own observations and reports when he returned from Carlsbad on the evening of July 18 disagreed with Hoffman's assessment. Washburne dismissed the accuracy of the Ems telegram because it had been challenged by King Wilhelm. "There is no truth in the reports concerning the indignity which the King of the North German Confederation offered to Benedetti, the Envoy of France."<sup>7</sup> Washburn based this statement on a published denial by the King which he had read in Cologne while returning to Paris. Though he questioned the veracity of the Ems telegram, Washburne still credited it with arousing the French Chamber of Deputies to vote for war.

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<sup>5</sup>Hoffman to Fish, July 8, 1870, #217, U.S., Department of State, Despatches from U.S. Ministers to France, Microcopy M 34, Roll 70. Hereafter cited as Despatches - France.

<sup>6</sup>Hoffman to Fish, July 14, 1870, #220, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Washburne to Fish, July 19, 1870, #225, *ibid.*

Washburne then became almost entirely engrossed in the problem of protecting the citizens of the North German Confederation, of which there were about thirty thousand in Paris alone. Before the actual declaration of war, the German chargé d'affaires had approached Hoffman and requested American protection for the subjects of the Confederation. Hoffman telegraphed the State Department on July 15, "War is certain. Can I take Prussian subjects in France under our protection?"<sup>8</sup> Fish authorized this protection provided that France made no objections. France consented.

Helping Washburne in the role of protector of the citizens of the North German Confederation was the United States Consul General in Paris, John Meredith Read, Jr. A lawyer from Pennsylvania who had only recently become a diplomat, Read was the son of a prominent Philadelphia jurist who had served on the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania for fifteen years. During the early months of the Civil War, he directed the military efforts of New York State. Having supported Grant in 1868, he received the post of consul general at Paris on April 16, 1869.

In Read's official reports to the State Department, there are few analytical comments on the cause of the war between France and Prussia. Like Washburne, he was more concerned with practical matters, especially since he was responsible for protecting the business interests of the North German Confederation from July, 1870, through December, 1871. Read left the political comment to Washburne, and rightly so since the office of consul dealt primarily with commerce, trade and business concerns.

After obtaining the assent of the French to American protection of the North German citizens, Washburne again contacted French authorities to ascertain the procedure to follow in enabling the Germans to return home. It was then that a complication arose because the Duc de Gramont, the French Foreign Minister, replied that no Germans of military age would be allowed to leave France.

Washburne attacked this argument from a legal standpoint, citing international law and precedent. On July 25, 1870, in a letter to Gramont, he professed surprise "that a liability to perform military service in the home army constitutes a sufficient reason for the refusal of the ordinary privilege of quitting foreign belligerent territory," noting that a male of any age or condition under certain circumstances might be called upon to bear arms. He continued:

Even in feudal times, when the liability to do military duty to the sovereign lord or king was held in much greater strictness than at the present day I do not find that the point was insisted upon of the

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<sup>8</sup>Hoffman to Fish, July 15, 1870 (telegram), *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1870* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1870), p. 64. Hereafter cited as *Foreign Relations, 1870*.

returning liege being liable to become a hostile soldier. . . . The same principle [the right to leave belligerent territory after the outbreak of hostilities] is incorporated into various subsisting treaties of the United States, and . . . the highest American authority on public law, Chancellor Kent, considers the principle to have become an established formula of modern public law.<sup>9</sup>

Gramont wrote back on August 3, 1870, that what "one law has done under certain circumstances, another law can modify, if there is an occasion,"<sup>10</sup> making light of Kent as a legal authority. But after this exchange the French government changed its mind under the pressure of war events and informed Washburne that virtually all Germans would have to leave Paris. Washburne telegraphed Fish: "French government decides North Germans, with certain exceptions, quit France."<sup>11</sup>

Subsequently Washburne was so busy issuing papers to the Germans that he found no time for diplomatic reporting and analysis. "One morning," he reported, "on reaching my legation, at seven o'clock, I found it surrounded by several thousand Germans in the street adjoining."<sup>12</sup> Washburne, along with J. Conrad Kern, the Swiss Minister and protector of the subjects of Bavaria and Baden, and Okouneff, the Russian chargé d'affaires and protector of the subjects of Württemberg, met with the French Minister of Interior, Léon-Théophile Chevreau, to discuss the expulsion, which Chevreau said was partly due to the need to protect the Germans from the excited Parisians. Washburne felt that the Minister would do all he could to help the three protecting foreign representatives and that the time for legal sparring was over. From then on, he relied on human compassion to strengthen his pleas. On August 17, he wrote to Prince de la Tour d'Auvergne, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who had replaced Gramont after the downfall of the Ollivier ministry:

The removal of such a population in a few days, even with all ameliorations, could not fail to carry with it an incredible amount of suffering and misery, involving, as it must the breaking up of homes and the sacrifice and abandonment of property. . . . From my observation, the great number [of Germans] seem to be composed . . . of honest, industrious, laboring men and women, who have come into the country under the sanction of public faith, relying upon the hospitality and protection of the government. . . . The scenes I am compelled to daily witness are afflicting. . . . I feel that I should be forgetful of the

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<sup>9</sup>*Foreign Relations, 1870*, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 95. Also quoted in *Recollections*, I:48.

<sup>11</sup>*Foreign Relations, 1870*, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup>*Recollections*, I:81.

obligations of humanity did I not make the strongest appeal to the government of His Majesty, through Your Excellency, to futher consider this question.<sup>13</sup>

The Secretary of State does not seem to have missed political reports or analyses from the Minister in Paris even though, as we shall see, the American Minister in Berlin was a copious reporter. In his memoirs, in accounting for his time, Washburne wrote that by September 2, 1870:

I had viséed and given safe-conducts for nearly thirty thousand persons, subjects of the North German Confederation . . . I had given railroad tickets to the Prussian frontier for eight thousand of those people. . . My time was then a good deal occupied in looking up Germans who had been arrested and thrown into prison . . . when one of these [persons arbitrarily arrested] could get word to me of his imprisonment I never failed, in a single instance, in getting the party promptly released.<sup>14</sup>

The special appropriations Washburne needed to help the German subjects had been provided in the middle of August by the Prussian government.

Because of his preoccupation with the task of protection of subjects of the North German Confederation and because Washburne normally was given more to reporting on the French political developments than on foreign policy, he did not assess or comment on blame for the war in his official communications with the State Department at that time. In his memoirs written in 1886, he blamed the French government for the outbreak of the war:

The exaggeration in Paris and France of this simple incident [Benedetti's interview with William] surpassed all bounds, and they were apparently made to inflame the people still more. It really appeared that the Government of France had determined to have war with Germany, . . . the courtiers and adventurers who surrounded the Emperor seemed to think that it was about time to have a war, . . . to fix firmly on the throne the son of Napoleon the Third and restore to the Imperial crown the lustre it had lost.<sup>15</sup>

But Washburne did not, even then, include Napoleon III when blaming the government. Washburne had had good relations with the Emperor since his arrival at the American legation in Paris, and he retained his high opinion of

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<sup>13</sup>*Foreign Relations*, 1870, p. 104. Also quoted in *Recollections*, I:91.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

Napoleon III as “intelligent and thoughtful and a good judge of men.”<sup>16</sup> He wrote:

It seemed to be very clear to my mind that if the Emperor had been left to himself, war would have been averted. I am quite sure that his heart was never in the venture. He had just entered upon his scheme of a parliamentary government, and everything promised a substantial success. I think he was sincere in his wish to introduce certain real reforms into his government.<sup>17</sup>

Like Washburne, Hoffman in his memoirs did not blame Napoleon III for deciding to declare war. At the time of the crisis, however, he interpreted the conflict as a personal feud. In a dispatch on July 8, he noted that the rise of Bismarck was a challenge to Napoleon III whose “policy has been thwarted by Bismarck in more than one instance.” Further, Hoffman stated: “And it will not be surprising if this bitterness—this personal rivalry between these distinguished statesmen—should prove disastrous to the peace of Europe.”<sup>18</sup>

The State Department received late and, at times, conflicting reports about the development of the July crisis. For example, on July 14, Hoffman sent two telegrams to Washington. In the first, he reported that chances were against war; in the second, he said that chances were strong for war. In a third telegram on July 15, he declared that war was certain. As to the actual responsibility for the war, little space was given in reports from Paris in July to an assessment—partly because of the confusing situation and partly because Washburne was away from Paris during the crisis itself. However, even if Washburne had been present, it is doubtful that he would have written insightful commentaries on what was happening. Washburne’s character was more attuned to practical realities than to conceptualizing and prognostication. Once the war had begun, Washburne, Hoffman, and Read found no time for analyzing events because they devoted all their time and energy in trying to protect the citizens and property of the North German Confederation.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Despatches - France, #217.



## *II. Responsibility For War:*

### *Reports From Berlin*

President Andrew Johnson appointed George Bancroft as American Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Berlin in May, 1867. Bancroft remained at this post seven years until June, 1874. For Bancroft this was a happy assignment because he loved Germany where he had studied as a young man.

Pleasant memories had remained with him for half a century of Göttingen and the Prussian capital; he had an excellent knowledge of the language, a familiarity with German manners and customs, a nature well fitted to understand the Prussian character, and a reputation that assured his instant acceptance into the inner circle of intellectual, social, and political life.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1800, Bancroft was the eighth of thirteen children. He grew up in a home where liberalism and freedom of inquiry were respected and fostered. His father, Aaron Bancroft, a minister of the Second Congregational Society of Worcester, advocated religious liberalism there thirty years before it became fashionable.

After graduating from Harvard, Bancroft determined to continue his studies as a divinity student. John Thornton Kirkland, president of Harvard, provided a monetary subsidy to enable him to attend Georg August University at Göttingen. In September, 1820, after two years of study, Bancroft received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Arts. After leaving Göttingen, Bancroft then attended lectures for five months at the University of Berlin. It was during this time that he fell in love with Berlin—a possible liability for a diplomat whose judgments should not be clouded by sentiment.

After leaving Berlin in February, 1821, Bancroft traveled to Paris, London, Geneva, and Rome. Along the way he visited various scholars, writers, and other prominent artists and intellectuals. In Paris he dined with Washington Irving, Benjamin Constant, General Lafayette, and Albert Gallatin. Upon his return to the United States in August, 1822, Bancroft entered the educational profession, first teaching at Harvard and then establishing Round Hill School in Northampton, Massachusetts. He began a

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<sup>1</sup>Russel B. Nye, *George Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), p. 239.



political career in the 1830s by supporting Andrew Jackson's position on the banks.<sup>2</sup> In 1838, Bancroft became the Collector of Customs for the Port of Boston and the leader of the Democratic party in Massachusetts. His prominence rose in strongly Whig Boston, even though he was a Democrat.

After his defeat in the 1844 Massachusetts gubernatorial election, Bancroft became involved in national politics. In return for Bancroft's support in the presidential campaign of 1844, James K. Polk appointed Bancroft to his cabinet. As Secretary of the Navy, Bancroft established the Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1845—copying the Prussian example of education for military personnel. From 1846 through 1849 he served as American minister to London.<sup>3</sup> He thus had considerably more diplomatic experience than his colleague in Paris.

From 1849 to 1867, Bancroft worked on his *History* and produced six volumes.<sup>4</sup> Bancroft's interpretation of history emphasized nationalism: "To Bancroft American history was a heroic epic, an exultation over American achievement, a credo of faith in eternal national progress."<sup>5</sup> The German influence on his *Weltanschauung* was strong. Traces can be seen of Hegel's nationalistic philosophy of history which "saw the past as a record of the desire for freedom in the human spirit," of Eichhorn's work on the German national spirit, and of Herder, Schlegel, and Schelling who had developed a philosophy of history from the theory of progress.<sup>6</sup>

From the beginning of his service as United States Minister to Prussia, Bancroft enjoyed a privileged position. He was regarded as a noted historian—a prestigious profession—and as a social and diplomatic asset to Berlin society. In addition, Bismarck treated him with deference. Bismarck broke court precedent in 1867 when he took Bancroft for an audience with the king before the king had issued an invitation. Bismarck dined with the Bancrofts even when he had refused other invitations. Furthermore, Bancroft was the only foreign diplomat whom Bismarck invited to his Varzin estate.

Bismarck was also interested in fostering good relations with the United States, and so he was pleased with Bancroft as American representative. Bismarck wanted America's moral support for (and possibly maritime

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<sup>2</sup>During this decade, Bancroft began his first volume of *The History of the United States from the Discovery of the Continent*.

<sup>3</sup>Although he "had little love for the British people and less sympathy for British politicians," Bancroft grew to like his post because of the cultured society in which he moved. Nye, *Bancroft*, p. 160.

<sup>4</sup>Bancroft had written three volumes prior to his mission to England.

<sup>5</sup>Jesse Hauk Shera, *Historians, Books and Libraries* (Cleveland: Press of Western Reserve University, 1953), p. 67.

<sup>6</sup>Nye, *Bancroft*, p. 96.

defense of) the unification of Germany.<sup>7</sup> He worked with Bancroft to settle outstanding problems between the two countries. In 1867, the major difference between Prussia and the United States concerned the Prussian insistence that naturalized American citizens of German birth were still liable for military service in Prussia. Bancroft began negotiations very soon after his arrival in Berlin and successfully concluded a naturalization treaty in February, 1868. This contributed to furthering friendly relations between the two countries. When Grant was elected President in 1868 and there was a rumor that Bancroft would be replaced, Bismarck made efforts to ensure that Bancroft would stay in Berlin.

Bancroft had a high opinion of Bismarck. To him, the Chancellor was a towering statesman, "a very human person, 'moderate in the hour success,' and fearlessly pursuing his policies without a thought of any personal advantage."<sup>8</sup> Bancroft felt that Bismarck was a fellow believer in liberal principles and admired his ability in unifying Germany, which he saw as the natural outcome of "the progress of man." As many others at the time, Bancroft misread Bismarck. For example, he wrote optimistically about Bismarck's arrival in Berlin during the height of the July crisis:

His coming is friendly to peace, for among his qualities as a statesman he has to an eminent degree the quality of moderation.<sup>9</sup>

This basic misunderstanding of Bismarck led Bancroft to conclude that Bismarck could never have desired or sought a war with France.

Bancroft's bias toward Prussia was evident in his official dispatches and private letters about the Franco-Prussian War. He described the conflict in terms of good (Germany) and evil (France). He applauded the cause for which Prussia fought and viewed the conflict as necessary for the progress of history. He wrote: ". . . all Germany unites as one man in the war, which is held to be a war for peace, independence and national existence."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Henry Blumenthal, "George Bancroft in Berlin: 1867-1874," *New England Quarterly* 37 (June 1964): 228-9. "As the leader of a land of power, Bismarck rather wishfully hoped to be able to count on the naval resources of the United States, should the future need for them arise. His inquiry in this regard just prior to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War leaves no doubt about this long-range speculation. On July 12, 1870, he instructed Secretary of State von Thile to determine whether in case of war the United States would grant Germany 'the means of maritime defense.' He had specifically in mind to fit out ships in American ports for the purpose of harassing French merchantmen on the high seas."

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>9</sup>#110, U.S., Department of State, Despatches from U.S. Ministers to the German States and Germany, Roll 16, Microcopy M44, Hereafter cited as Despatches - Germany.

<sup>10</sup>#116, *ibid.*

Regarding the possibility of war, Bancroft reported on July 14 that, although he personally thought that war would be avoided, the prevailing opinion was that war was imminent. He presented both sides of the questions so that Washington could make up its own mind about whether France would declare war.

In weighing the grounds that may sway the decision of the Emperor, it must be considered, on the one side, that France is isolated, without an ally; that Spain must be against her; that the question of the occupation of Rome would again become embarrassing; that all the powers of Europe counsel France against war; that Germany is united, and as a land power is fully equal to France.

On the other hand there are those who say that France is greatly convulsed in its interior; that the peasantry are suffering from the failure of the harvest; that the strikes of the workingmen are every day becoming more alarming; that political discontent has crept into the army; and that Napoleon has no option but between the dangers of a war and the dangers of a revolution.<sup>11</sup>

Bancroft thus analyzed the situation in France—something that an ambassador accredited to one country does not normally do with respect to another country. He concluded, “War is too great a danger for the Emperor’s dynasty.” His prediction was wrong: war was declared. His conclusion was correct: the war proved fatal to the Second Empire.

In assessing the responsibility for the war, Bancroft felt that Prussia had tried to avoid a war. The French Emperor was the culprit. On July 12, 1870, he reported to the State Department:

Napoleon demands of the King of Prussia that he [Prince Leopold] shall not be admitted to a place on the list of candidates for the Spanish throne, and couples his demand with a gross menace of war. . . . Grave as the affair appears a war will be avoided unless the Emperor of France and his ministers are resolved at all hazards to make war on North Germany.<sup>12</sup>

The final, “saving” clause of course covered Bancroft, but the weight of his prediction was that war was not imminent. Further, to prove his view of France’s guilt, Bancroft on July 23 (after war had been declared) still argued to the State Department that Leopold’s candidature was not a threat to France. He claimed that Napoleon was more closely related to Leopold than Wilhelm was.

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<sup>11</sup>#111, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>#110, *ibid.*

Bancroft exonerated King Wilhelm from any active participation in provoking the war. He reported an account to the State Department to prove that the King was a model of correct behavior at Ems. He wrote:

One of my colleagues, who was at Ems during the whole time that Benedetti was there, assures me that nothing could have been more gentle and forbearing and polite than the conduct of the aged King towards him.<sup>13</sup>

In the next, dispatch, Bancroft also argued that the King had acted properly in not forbidding Leopold's acceptance of the Spanish throne. He explained—even while the war was already raging—that the Prussian king had ordered an examination of the family archives to see if he had a right to prohibit Leopold's acceptance of the throne. This investigation revealed that the king “had no such right; he therefore could not forbid the Prince from the career of adventure.”<sup>14</sup> In this same dispatch, Bancroft also blamed Leopold for being too ambitious. He was the only German whom Bancroft considered to have done wrong.

Though convinced that the French Emperor was responsible for the war, Bancroft tried to excuse the people of France. On August 6, 1870, he reported talking with some of the French prisoners of war:

The discontent with the war and the discontent with their Emperor were more openly expressed than I could have believed. Some of them insisted that more than one half of the army had voted against the Plebiscite [which brought Napoleon III to power]. This is an exaggeration, but in substance confirms the opinion which I had formed—that the French army is in some degree demoralized and weary of the Emperor . . . the war exceedingly unpopular in France . . . the tumult of excitement at the outbreak of war was superficial and in part created by Government influence.<sup>15</sup>

In a letter to Fish, he characterized the Second Empire as that “corrupting, wasteful, and immoral government of Louis Napoleon.”<sup>16</sup> In a letter to Washburne on September 13, he rejoiced in the downfall of the Emperor:

I judged Napoleon justly twenty four years ago; and have never

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<sup>13</sup>#115, *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>#116, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>#123, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>Letter to Fish, November 21, 1870, in M. A. De Wolfe Howe, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), II:247.

wavered in my opinion of him. He has done France infinite evil; his defeat and captivity came like a thunderbolt from Heaven.<sup>17</sup>

In his private correspondence, Bancroft emotionally described Napoleon's defeat and capture at Sedan:

The old contest between evil and good; and the victory at Marathon, and on the plains of Abraham on the side of civilisation and freedom. A people in arms crushes the degenerate hosts of despotism; and this restless spirit of mischief [that] has had its abode in the Tuileries is at last to be exorcised.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, even when he talked with the captured Emperor in September 1870, he hesitated to believe what Louis Napoleon declared.

The Emperor said that he lamented the calamity of the war and declared that he himself had not wished for war, but had been compelled to it by the pressure of the public opinion of France.<sup>19</sup>

In a postscript to his report, Bancroft in Berlin gave his own assessment of the French political situation so that Washington would not be swayed by the report about what the Emperor had said:

The great majority of the [French] rural population not only did not desire war: they were greatly dissatisfied that it was declared.<sup>20</sup>

At the consular office in Berlin was the German-born Hermann Kreismann, a friend of Elihu Benjamin Washburne. Born in Schwarzburg, Germany, Kreismann held allegiance to the United States, according to the consular record. Before his official mission abroad, he lived in Chicago, Illinois, and helped Washburne add the German-American vote to the Republicans—particularly during the 1860 election. He was appointed secretary of the United States Legation to Berlin in August, 1861, and consul on December 18, 1865. He served in that office until June, 1874, when he was promoted to Consul General, remaining in Berlin until August, 1881.

Kreismann was aware that reporting on the political developments within Prussia was not his job. But in his reports he touched upon the events and their consequences. Since he was concerned with commerce and trade, one

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid. II:240.

<sup>18</sup>Letter to Mrs. J. C. Bancroft Davis, September 4, 1870, *ibid.*, pp. 235–6.

<sup>19</sup>Despatches - Germany, #134.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

of his contributions was his analysis of how the war would and did affect American business. In a report on July 18, he reported the shock of the "great financial and commercial convulsion" and his dismay of what would happen to the many orders that had recently been placed by American merchants. He predicted the close of the ports of Hamburg and Bremen and felt that this would be detrimental because it would stop direct communication between the United States and Germany. The most urgent problem was the twelve per cent decline of the price of United States bonds. He joined with Bancroft in urging Washington to ensure American credit abroad. He ended the dispatch with a brief account of the German popular opinion toward the war. The people "go into war with ardor and enthusiasm . . . believing them to be in the right, war having been wantonly forced upon them."<sup>21</sup> Kreismann offered the wish that Germany would be victorious.

Though Kreismann had thought that the war would dislocate trade and commerce, he discovered in actuality that trade had improved. The American bonds rose, and the exports to the United States were good because of open ports in Belgium and the Netherlands. In early September, he wrote, "Business is generally reviving, the export of goods to the United States active, and the money market easy and buoyant."<sup>22</sup> This was the general trend he reported throughout the coming months.

Another observation that Kreismann made was about whether the Franco-Prussian war would evolve into a general European conflict. According to his assessment, if Germany lost a major battle, Denmark would probably enter the war on the French side. Italy and Austria, already leaning toward France, would side with her, and Russia would side with Germany. This assessment of the nature of the war contrasted to some extent with Washburne's in dispatch 246 which reported that "many intelligent and informed persons" felt the war would not be localized but that he disagreed and believed that the countries not yet involved would maintain their neutrality.

Thus, the messages to the State Department from the Berlin legation and consulate fostered the view of Prussia (and particularly Wilhelm) as a victim of a hostile French imperial policy. Consequently, the American representatives expressed hopes for a German victory because right was on their side.

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<sup>21</sup>#115, U.S., Department of State, Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Berlin, 1865-1906, Microcopy T163, Roll 3.

<sup>22</sup>#120, *ibid.*

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### *III. Bancroft, Bismarck And The New German Reich*

As we have seen, Bancroft interpreted events in a light favorable to Prussia. He remained in character when he reported and analyzed the secret draft treaty Count Benedetti had proposed in 1866 and which was published in the London *Times* shortly after the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War.<sup>1</sup> In this instance as well as in his dispatches reporting the progress toward the unification of Germany and in his advice against American mediation, Bancroft promoted the cause of Prussia.

Count Benedetti, the French ambassador, had submitted a handwritten proposal to Bismarck offering French approval of German unity in exchange for territorial concessions from Prussia (including the right to annex or purchase the Netherlands, Luxemburg, and Belgium). In this manner Napoleon III had hoped that France could gain something to counter-balance the growing power and prestige of Prussia which had just successfully concluded a war with Austria. The deal was refused by Prussia but Bismarck kept a copy of the French proposal and used it after the declaration of war by France four years later.

Through his representatives in England, Bismarck was responsible for the publication of the secret draft treaty in the London *Times* on July 25, 1870. He had a dual aim: to ensure that England would not give aid to France and to arouse antipathy toward France in the southern German states so they would be more amenable to the creation of a united Germany. Bismarck was successful. Great Britain became alarmed over the French interest in Belgium and the Netherlands because the independence of these countries on the coast of the English Channel was of strategic importance to Great Britain. Although the *Times* provided the correct treaty date (August, 1866), the accompanying editorial comment implied that the treaty had been offered again to Prussia more recently. The English, suspicious of France and Napoleon III for a decade, believed the editorial despite denials by the French government. On July 28, the issue was debated in the House of Commons, and on July 30 the Cabinet proposed new treaties to France and to Prussia. The treaties provided that Great Britain would defend Belgium if her neutrality were violated by either belligerent. Prussia signed on August 9, and France signed two days later.

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<sup>1</sup>Information about the secret draft treaty in this chapter is from Dora Neill Raymond, *British Policy and Opinion during the Franco-Prussian War* (New York: Columbia University, 1921).



The American State Department learned of the publication of the treaty through its official representatives in the European capitals. There was a notable difference in the manner and length of the reports from Paris and Berlin. Washburne acted as a transmitter of information and offered little analysis about the proposal or its publication. He sent copies of reports from the French journals and commented that the incident had caused "great sensation in the diplomatic and other circles of Paris."<sup>2</sup> He let the newspaper accounts stand without comment.

Washburne at this point in the war was, as we have seen, extremely busy trying to protect the German citizens and negotiating with the French government for their safe passage back to Germany. Thus he felt that he lacked time to examine or try to ascertain the authenticity or significance of the Benedetti draft treaty. But Washburne's lack of interpretation was also typical of his unprofessional style of diplomatic behavior—to report on events as they happened and let Washington deduce any significance from the reports.

In Berlin, more attention and analysis—but also more passionate feeling—was devoted to the publication. Bancroft interpreted the Benedetti proposal as a dastardly deed of the French. On July 27, he assured Secretary of State Hamilton Fish of the authenticity of the document. Although Bancroft perceived that the treaty was directed against Great Britain, he misunderstood the underlying motive for the publication. He only saw the French as schemers who were capable of offending and threatening not only Prussia but also Great Britain. He wrote:

To-day I have to send you an authentic copy of one of the most remarkable documents ever framed by a European statesman. . . . You may rely implicitly on the authenticity of the document of which I inclose a copy, for I have seen the original, in the handwriting of Benedetti, which handwriting is very well known to me. As an expression of contempt for the restraints of international law, the document may rank with the late declaration of war by the Emperor against Prussia; but it has, moreover, the character of a defiance of Great Britain.<sup>3</sup>

What is remarkable is that Bancroft was shown the original Benedetti treaty so that he could pronounce on its authenticity. Bismarck knew the value of having an official representative of a neutral country proclaim that Benedetti had indeed written the document.

Although Bancroft had vouched for the document's authenticity, the State

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<sup>2</sup>Washburne to Fish, July 29, 1870, *Foreign Relations, 1870*, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 198-9.

Department requested further information. The acting Secretary, J. C. B. Davis, instructed Bancroft on August 23, 1870, to find out when the Benedetti proposal had been made and why there had been a delay in revealing the contents of the draft treaty. On December 17, Bancroft answered the questions posed to him four months before. He gave a lengthy explanation of the designs of Louis Napoleon:

Napoleon had expected Prussia and Austria would exhaust themselves in the campaign of 1866 and leave him the umpire of Europe. He was taken by surprise by the swift success of Prussia. He still hoped to secure to himself acquisitions of territory as a condition to his assent to the peace. . . . The Emperor demanded, first, a retrocession of the territory of Prussia held under the treaty of 1815. . . . Secondly, the Emperor demanded that Luxemburg should never again be included in the German Union. . . . Here then, is the answer to your first question: The time when Mr. Benedetti delivered to Count Bismarck the project of the treaty for the surrender of Belgium to France was during the agitation of the Luxemburg question, perhaps in April, 1867.<sup>4</sup>

More interesting was the reasoning that Bancroft gave for the delay of publication. Bismarck was pictured as the stalwart hero—defending the rights of territory of Germans and ensuring peace:

He [Bismarck] did not, indeed, publish the proposition of France, for it might have brought on a war, which he strove to avoid, and the treaty was published only when war had come. . . . The advantage proposed to Prussia for betraying Belgium into the hands of France was the consent of France to coercing the southern states into the North German Union. In the circular of the 7th of September, 1867, Count Bismarck said . . . never, under any circumstances whatever, would North Germany coerce the southern German states, or any of them to join the North German Union, being resolved to wait till they themselves should ask to be received. . . . Count Bismarck first maintained that not a bit of German territory should be ceded; and when it was proposed that France would take Belgium, and North Germany South Germany, he rejected the offer and asserted with energy that no foreign power whatsoever, not even Austria, had any right to interfere with the union of North and South Germany; that it was a question for the German states to settle exclusively among themselves.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>*Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1871* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1871), p. 361. Hereafter cited as *Foreign Relations, 1871*.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

George Bancroft, the historian, imbued his history with the belief that there was a divine plan for eventual world unity and freedom. He firmly believed in the progress of man, democratic liberalism, and nationalism. In Volume VI of his *History*, Bancroft developed a relationship between German liberalism and the rise of freedom in the United States. It is not surprising, then, that he viewed Bismarck and the Prussian bid for unification as a parallel of the union of the American colonies a century earlier. In writing to Washington in September, 1867, he declared that "but for the triumph of the union in America, it could not have succeeded in North Germany."<sup>6</sup>

Bancroft's dispatches and letters show him as genuinely believing that the emerging Prussian-dominated Germany would institute liberal reforms and would be based on the American example of constitution and government. On August 2, 1870, in assessing Prussia's war aims, he wrote that the German military were involved "in a war not only for peace, independence and union of Germany but also for the best interests of civilization, of civil and religious liberty and of popular freedom."<sup>7</sup>

In order to provide time for Germany to achieve these ends, Bancroft promoted non-interference in the Franco-Prussian War. When on September 8, Jules Favre, the French Foreign Minister, asked Grant to join with other powers in mediation, Bancroft convinced Fish and Grant to refrain from action. He felt that Germany and France should be left to settle matters alone. He cabled: "Every other power holds back. America would stand alone and unable to accomplish anything. Our interest, dignity, requires us for the present to stand aloof."<sup>8</sup> In two longer dispatches Bancroft explained more fully why he felt the United States should not mediate: no other power had offered their services as mediator; France had declared war without consultation with other governments, so France should seek peace in the same way; and since Alsace and Lorraine would be a condition of the peace and France would always be dissatisfied with this cession, the United States would best refrain from active participation.<sup>9</sup> It is to these reasons that Fish referred when he acknowledged Bancroft's influence in determining the American position on mediation in a dispatch to him in the end of September. "The reasons which you present against an American intervention between France and Germany are substantially among the considerations which determined the President in the course and policy [of rejecting mediation.]"<sup>10</sup> When France renewed its request for American influence in October, the United States declined to act.

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<sup>6</sup>Nye, *Bancroft*, p. 249.

<sup>7</sup>Despatches - Germany, #121.

<sup>8</sup>*Foreign Relations, 1870*, p. 206.

<sup>9</sup>Despatches - Germany, #132; #133.

<sup>10</sup>*Foreign Relations, 1870*, p. 194.

In counseling the United States to refrain from mediation, Bancroft strengthened the traditional stance of American non-interference in European affairs. But, this had not been his main intention: he had wanted to give Germany time to defeat France. A victory for Bismarck could consolidate the unification of Germany, something that he saw as a step forward in the progress of civilization.

Bancroft's admiration of Prussia and his American patriotism explain his interpretation of the creation of the German Reich as a liberal reform. To him the elements which demonstrated the liberal tendencies of Germany were universal suffrage, the parliamentary constitution, and the federal system of government—all of which he took at face value as furthering the rights of individuals. He felt that Prussia exhibited the finest democratic principles in all of Europe. He wrote: "According to our American ideas of Republicanism there is more solid, substantial, law-respecting, enduring republicanism in Germany than in any other State of Europe, not excepting England."<sup>11</sup> He did not see any inconsistency between this republicanism and the later coronation of the King of Prussia as Emperor because the German union was federal, had representative institutions, and had obtained the approval of both the governments and the people of the separate German states. In April, 1871, Bancroft wrote: "The German Diet maintains its liberal character. It has a clear majority in favor of a liberal policy."<sup>12</sup>

In his analysis of the "liberal" constitution, Bancroft overlooked the superficiality of Bismarck's liberalism. While noting the provisions, he failed to understand why they were included and neglected to see what was missing. The constitution itself had been drafted under Bismarck's direction and was not a product of a convention. There was no guarantee of civil rights. The universal suffrage for the election of members to the Reichstag did not favor the liberal urban population because the bulk of the voters were the conservative peasantry. By not providing payment for the Reichstag members, the constitution ensured the exclusion of the growing working class (and much of the middle class) who could not afford to work without a salary. In the Bundesrat, Prussia maintained her strength by retaining enough votes to block any attempt to amend the constitution. While the Reichstag had limited powers, the imperial chancellor—with no responsibility to the parliament—was in charge of policy. Effectively, Prussia dominated the federation, and the chancellor dominated Prussia.

Bancroft believed that the underlying affinity between Germany and the United States naturally produced Germany's imitation of America's example. He explained this view in a letter to Fish in October, 1870:

Our foreign political interests almost always run parallel with those of

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<sup>11</sup>Despatches - Germany, #152.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., #213.

Germany, and are often in direct conflict with those of France. . . . Germany adopts from us the federative system; France, whether empire, monarchy, or republic, adheres to the system of centralization. . . . If we need solid, trusty good will of any government in Europe, we can have it best with Germany; because German institutions and ours most nearly resemble each other; and because so many millions of Germans have become our countrymen. This war will leave Germany the most powerful state in Europe, and the most free; its friendship is, therefore, most important to us; and has its foundations in history and in nature.<sup>13</sup>

In early November, Bancroft compared Bavaria's reluctance to join a German union to the situation in 1789 when North Carolina delayed entry into the American Union. But Bancroft accurately predicted that Bavaria would hold out for only a short while. On November 29, 1870, Bancroft reported that the treaties of union had been completed and rejoiced that, as he saw it, America was the parent to the German confederation. America's development provided the model for Germany. He wrote: "In one sense the new government is the child of America; but for our success in our civil war it would not have been established. Our victory in that strife sowed the seeds of the regeneration of Europe."<sup>14</sup>

A week later, Bancroft reported that many European journals feared the development of a despotic Germany. He dismissed these fears with an affirmation of belief in the rulers of Germany. He further stated that he believed that "the union of Germany means the freedom of Germany external and internal, its independence as a Cosmopolitan power, its natural development and progress in internal freedom."<sup>15</sup>

On January 18, 1871, King Wilhelm of Prussia received the title of Emperor in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. The news was telegraphed to Berlin where the Proclamation of the German Reich was published. Upon learning of the creation of the German Reich, Bancroft wrote to Washington strongly emphasizing the similarities between the United States and German governments.

This union cannot but especially touch the sympathies of the United States partly because it is in so many respects a copy of our own union. . . .

United America may see in United Germany a reproduction of its own constitution with such modifications as the history and condition of Germany seemed to require . . .

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<sup>13</sup>Howe, *Bancroft*, II:246-7.

<sup>14</sup>*Foreign Relations, 1871*, p. 359.

<sup>15</sup>Despatches - Germany, #168.

Its constitution in another respect resemble our own; it imparts exceeding strength for the purposes of self-defense and takes from its chief the power of entering upon wars of conquest and ambition.<sup>16</sup>

Bancroft thus welcomed the empire, a form of government he had denounced in France. His admiration for Germany outweighed his dislike of empires.

Bancroft, mesmerized by his Prussophilism, was an asset to the Iron Chancellor. He authenticated the Benedetti draft treaty whose publication had guaranteed a strict British neutrality. He then by his arguments against American mediation lessened Bismarck's fear of neutrals banding together to force moderate peace demands. Finally, he interpreted each step in the development of a unified Germany (activation of the southern military alliances, the November treaties, the proclamation of the Reich, the election and sessions of the new parliamentary houses) in a way that evoked sympathy in Washington.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., #181.



## IV. Washburne And The Siege of Paris

Life in Paris during the Franco-Prussian War presented many difficulties for the American representatives. There was confusion in the capital as governments collapsed or were challenged and new ones set up. Washburne reported on the changes of ministry and type of government, but his dispatches were brief and relayed facts with little political evaluation. For example, he provided a lengthy narrative of his observation of the *Corps législatif* following the news of the surrender at Sedan. He noticed the confusion, the fraternization of the people and the National Guard, and the popular enthusiasm for the proclamation of the republic. Nevertheless, he concluded the dispatch with a comment on the weather and his reaction to the events of the day:

The day had been pleasant and the night was beautiful beyond description . . . in a few brief hours of a Sabbath day I had seen a dynasty fall and a republic proclaimed, and all without the shedding of one drop of blood.<sup>1</sup>

Two months later he commented on the abortive uprising of the Commune of October 31. He dismissed it as a "little side show" which was at once "outstanding and ludicrous."<sup>2</sup> Little did he realize that the dissatisfaction displayed by some radical leaders would be repeated as a major political upheaval in March with the establishment of the Paris Commune.

While political developments in France were not the primary topic of the dispatches received by the State Department, Washburne's reports shed interesting light on the problems of living in a besieged city. Being the protectors of the enemy's citizens did not make the American representatives popular with the Parisians, who were losing the war. Further, rumors abounded that the United States was a partisan of Germany or of France.

In accord with international law and her own neutrality proclamation, the United States permitted private industry to sell arms and ammunition as long as these persons did not "carry such articles upon the high seas for the use or service of either belligerent." If such person did transport the war material, they were liable to "the risk of hostile capture, and the penalties denounced by the law of nations in that behalf."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Foreign Relations, 1870*, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> *Despatches - France*, #314.

<sup>3</sup> *Foreign Relations, 1870*, p. 47.



There were varied rumors that the United States was not abiding by her own rules. In early August, Washburne reported that Bancroft had requested him to investigate reports of an American in Paris ordering guns ostensibly for the United States but in reality for the French. It also seemed that Washburne's name was used to purchase cartridges in Belgium allegedly for Peru but actually for the French. Washburne was angry that his name was being sullied, and he reported that he was trying to locate "the scoundrel who had proposed to involve me in a matter of such gravity . . . a gross and unpardonable outrage."<sup>4</sup> The investigation came to nothing, however, since Washburne could find no reliable information to prove that the U.S. or he himself had been involved.

Of more serious consequence were 400,000 rifles and ammunition which were sold and shipped to France from the United States. These guns were stamped "U.S. Government" and came from American arsenals. Grant discontinued these sales when it was discovered that the customers were agents of the French government. In July and September, Bancroft questioned the State Department about American provision of war material to France. Fish responded, "In no case has a sale been made to any person known or suspected [as] an agent of either belligerent."<sup>5</sup> Bismarck did not charge the United States with a breach of neutrality when she sold the war material to an agent of the French government. According to one historian, Bismarck listened to the advice of Bancroft in choosing not to take official action as he had done in cases of similar British violations.<sup>6</sup> Bismarck, preferring to maintain cordial relations with the Americans, chose to overlook apparent—and probably unintentional—American violations of neutrality.

When the news of the French army's defeat and the Emperor's surrender reached Paris, it caused the overthrow of the regime and proclamation of a republic. On September 5, an announcement was made: "Citizens of Paris, the Republic is proclaimed. The Government has been named by acclamation. . . . The Government is, above all, a Government of National Defense." Washburne informed the State Department of these events and requested instructions. Acting Secretary of State Davis telegraphed: "As soon as situation in your judgment shall justify, tender the congratulations of President and people of United States on the successful establishment of republican government."<sup>7</sup> Washburne conveyed U.S. recognition of the new government on September 7. In the letter to Jules Favre, Minister of Foreign Affairs, he emphasized the pleasure of the United States in recognizing a *republic*. He wrote:

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<sup>4</sup>Despatches - France, #243.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Carlton Rohrs, "George Bancroft and American Foreign Relations" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 1976), p. 197.

<sup>6</sup>Stolberg-Wernigerode, p. 129.

<sup>7</sup>*Foreign Relations, 1870*, p. 67.

I beg to tender to yourself and the members of the Government of the National Defense the felicitations of the Government and the people of the United States. . . . Enjoying the untold and immeasurable blessings of a republican form of government for nearly a century, the people of the United States can but regard with profoundest interest the efforts of the French people to whom they are bound by the ties of a traditional friendship, to obtain such free institutions as will become to them and to their posterity the inalienable rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>8</sup>

The establishment of this new republican government produced a change of attitude in America toward France and Germany. Whereas in the summer, Americans had favored Germany in the belief that she was fighting a war both of self-defense and for national unity, by October the creation of a French republic and the hardship that France endured with such courage increased the sympathy of the American people toward France.

Of course, this new sentiment grew slowly over a period of several months. One important factor influencing the American attitude was the siege of Paris which lasted over four months. On September 20, Washburne reported: "All communication with Paris was cut yesterday morning, both by rail and by telegraph."<sup>9</sup> Most members of the new French government and of the diplomatic corps moved to Tours to carry on their work. Washburne, by his own testimony, was "the only minister of a first-class power who remained."<sup>10</sup> In November, the State Department gave Washburne and John Meredith Read, the U.S. Consul General, permission to leave the besieged capital, but both remained.<sup>11</sup> They considered it their duty to stay in Paris, the traditional capital of France, to protect one hundred and fifty Americans who chose not to leave in October and to watch over American property (especially of those Americans who departed). Valiantly and perseveringly, Washburne performed his duty throughout the siege, even when facing unique problems. He continued to protect the German citizens,<sup>12</sup> and responded with determination when American rights were threatened.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 117. The United States was the first nation to recognize the new French government.

<sup>9</sup>*Foreign Relations, 1870*, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup>*Recollections*, I:72-73. Five ministers in addition to Washburne remained in Paris. They were the representatives from Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, and Switzerland. Hoffman, p. 174.

<sup>11</sup>On the other hand, during the Commune (March 18-May 27, 1871), Washburne left Paris and stayed at Versailles.

<sup>12</sup>By this time the United States was the official protector of the citizens of Saxony, Hesse, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Colombia, Portugal, Uruguay, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Chile, Paraguay, and Venezuela, in addition to those of the North German Confederation.

When the siege began, three hundred American citizens were in Paris. Washburne worried about their fate, because he doubted that the French and Prussian authorities would allow them to leave Paris. On October 18, Jules Favre had informed Washburne, "Permission to leave Paris during the siege can only be granted to persons clothed with a diplomatic character."<sup>13</sup> A week later, on October 24, this provision was reversed. Washburne wrote to the State Department, "They [General Trochu and Jules Favre] finally agreed to change their determination, and let all of our Americans go who wanted to leave."<sup>14</sup> About half the Americans in Paris chose to depart, while the other one hundred fifty remained. With the achievement of this concession, Washburne's daily duties subsequently involved providing small sums of money for the indigent Germans, preparing dispatches, awaiting his dispatch bags (his link with the outside world), and occupying himself with other diplomatic activities.

During the siege, the amount and type of work at the Legation changed. No longer was there the urgency to provide safe conducts and transportation for nearly 30,000 Germans. It was this change in urgent business and the isolation from the outside world which played their parts in the psychological impact on the Americans. Washburne kept a diary during the siege which recorded the privations which accompanied his remaining in Paris. For the first month, the effect was minimal, but by November Washburne began to record prices of food—indicating that the prices were unusual and food less available. Expenses soared in the following months, and the quality and variety of foodstuffs diminished. Near the end of the siege, the rationing of bread began. This was indicative of the grim conditions in Paris because the government had continually asserted that there was enough food, and that bread would not have to be rationed. Fuel became a problem when the winter cold hit Paris. Although Washburne did not suffer from a lack of fuel, he commented on the scarcity of wood in his diary.

In contrast to the somber and gloomy comments of Washburne, the secretary of the Legation seemed to enjoy the siege—if his memoirs can be accepted literally. Hoffman recounted that the experience of the siege was "not an unpleasant one, especially in a city like Paris." One reason was his curiosity: "I had been a besieger at Port Hudson, and thought that I would like to experience the other sensation." Another was the fact that the siege brought relief from being "overworked and harrassed. . . . You live quietly in your own house, and with your own servants; and with a little forethought you may be amply provisioned."<sup>15</sup> He recalled that money could always obtain enough food, though not fuel, which had been seized by the government.

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<sup>13</sup>*Foreign Relations, 1870*, p. 130.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>15</sup>Hoffman, p. 181.

While the physical privations of the Legation were not great, the Americans nevertheless suffered the psychological impact of the siege—the sense of isolation, anxiety, and gloom. The lack of communication with the outside world (a little news was flown in by carrier-pigeon!) produced unrest and disquiet. When the news came of a French defeat, the crowds gathered and disturbances broke out. In the end of October, there was an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Government of National Defense. General Trochu in Paris planned sorties in December and in January, but both failed. Washburne observed all these developments and recorded his growing sympathy for the French.

Influencing Washburne was the Prussian policy of delaying his dispatch bags and of bombarding Paris (about which Washburne was indignant because he thought the diplomatic corps should have been informed before it started). In his diary, he wrote:

If anything could dishearten and discourage the French people, one would have supposed it would have been the news that came this morning, of the disasters at Orleans, Amiens and Rouen. But the Parisians seemed to take it as a matter of course, and only wonder that it was not worse. No signs of giving in. . .<sup>16</sup>

The carelessness and nonchalance of the Parisians in all this business is wonderful. . . . Ladies and gentlemen now make excursions to the Point du Jour to see the shells fall.<sup>17</sup>

Although Washburne received regular communications from Washington and London, his diary showed a growing sense of depression. He wondered if he was doing any good in Paris, and he wrote about some of his previous successful experiences. In January, 1871, he wrote:

Four months of siege to-day, and where has all this time gone: It seems to me as if I had been buried alive. I have accomplished nothing, and, separated from my family and friends, cut off from communication to a certain extent with the outside world, these dreary weeks might quite as well be struck out of my existence.<sup>18</sup>

It was no wonder then that Washburne valued his dispatch bags. He was adamant in protecting his right to send them through enemy lines. From early in the siege until after a French-German armistice was signed in the end of January, Washburne concerned himself with different aspects of his right to correspond with Washington. In September he joined the remaining

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<sup>16</sup>*Recollections*, I:265.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 317.

members of the diplomatic corps in Paris in requesting permission of Bismarck to send and receive communications with their home governments. Bismarck offered a qualified permission: "Only on the condition that such dispatches shall be unsealed and subject to the inspection of the Prussian authorities and contain nothing in relation to the war."<sup>19</sup> Washburne reacted indignantly because Bismarck was violating international law which allows neutrals to communicate with their governments without submitting to foreign inspection. Although previously Washburne had been hesitant to act without express instructions from the State Department, he now rejected Bismarck's terms out of hand.

Bismarck may have been surprised by the tone of Washburne's response, since in Berlin his dealings with Americans had been through the Prussophile Bancroft. Bismarck did not want to offend the Americans because he felt success was obtainable only by keeping neutrals satisfied and out of the conflict. Thus, he conceded to the Americans the privilege of sending and receiving communications. Simultaneously, he made sure that Washburne knew that the United States was being given preferential treatment. On the same day, in a letter to Archbishop Flavio Chigi, the Papal Nuncio and Doyen of the Diplomatic Corps in Paris, Bismarck denied the right of uninspected communications to or from the diplomatic corps of Paris.

Although the right (according to the United States) or the privilege (according to Bismarck) of sealed communication was established, a secondary problem arose over the contents of the dispatch bags. In a dispatch to Washburne, Bismarck redefined—in narrower terms—the permission he had granted to the Americans by professing ignorance that the dispatch bags would contain newspapers and other non-official communications. Washburne protested Bismarck's implied accusation of American misconduct but announced he would accept only American papers for his personal perusal and requested Bismarck's consent to this arrangement. (By "requesting", of course, he undermined his previous principled position on unhampered communication.) Then Washburne assumed the offensive by questioning the delays of his dispatch bags. "It ought not really to take more than four or five days for the bag to come from London, here, and I wish that hereafter I might receive it within this time."<sup>20</sup> Bismarck attempted to pacify Washburne by re-interpreting his original intentions. He wrote:

I only intended to call your attention to the abuse . . . convinced that you were unaware of [it] . . . But I had no intention to deprive you personally of the English or American papers which you wish to

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<sup>19</sup>*Foreign Relations, 1870*, p. 127.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid*, p. 284.

receive, and you are entirely free to have them come for your own private use.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, Bismarck allowed newspapers to be sent to Washburne—again not as a matter of right but as a concession. But Washburne in early January amazingly asked that no more papers be sent to him because “it is too much to be the only person in a city of two millions of people receiving any outside news. I prefer being without news to being subject to it.”<sup>22</sup>

In regard to private letters, a similar pattern took place in January: Bismarck accusing Americans of abuse of the privilege, Washburne angrily protesting American innocence, and Bismarck replying that he had been misunderstood. In this instance Bismarck cited as evidence a captured balloon which had implicated the American Legation in receiving and delivering private correspondence. Bismarck’s apology was sent on January 28, 1871—the day the armistice was signed between France and Germany. He wrote:

I should very much regret if you should have construed anything in these two letters so as to convey the indication of any complaint against you. Nothing, indeed, could be further from my thought and I take pleasure in renewing the expression how deeply sensible I am of all the trouble you have in carrying on your correspondence with the authorities in Paris, and in taking care of our countrymen there.<sup>23</sup>

Hamilton Fish was annoyed at the treatment Washburne was receiving at the hands of the Prussians. In November, he supported Washburne’s rejection of the Prussian permission to allow unsealed bags to pass through the Prussian lines and instructed Bancroft to propound America’s position of the right of communication with her representative in Paris. Bancroft was not impressed with the American position on this neutral right. He followed instructions, but the report of his conversation with the Prussian authorities indicated that he had acted perfunctorily. He implied that the issue was not important and that its practicality would disappear because the war would soon end.

In Paris, Hoffman also disagreed with Washburne and Fish. As a lawyer (but with no responsibility in this matter), he wrote in his memoirs that the right to receive and answer dispatches in sealed correspondence was “by no means clear. To me Bismarck’s argument is unanswerable.”<sup>24</sup> By the last

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<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>22</sup>*Recollections*, I: 308.

<sup>23</sup>*Foreign Relations, 1871*, p. 291.

<sup>24</sup>Hoffman, pp. 178–9.

statement, Hoffman meant that since the diplomats were in Paris voluntarily, they had no right to claim privileges.

In January Fish again telegraphed Bancroft to investigate and to remedy the delays of communication which Washburne had been reporting. He argued that since the United States was protecting the North German citizens, there should be some reciprocal treatment. In Berlin, George Bancroft could not believe that Germany was responsible for the delays. He reported that the German officials denied knowledge of any delays.

For explanation of the interruption alluded to by you in the telegram, I am left to a conjecture, aided by what has appeared in the public journals. The French press in Paris complains bitterly that Mr. Washburne alone received newspapers and communication from abroad, and the complaint [is that the newspapers] give no account of French victories. . . .

I will continue inquiry, and will not fail to make a proper representation to this government, should the grievance from which Mr. Washburne suffers be found to proceed from the German side; but I have no doubt that the difficulty has arisen in another quarter.<sup>25</sup>

One reason for Bancroft's confidence in the virtue of the Germans was that Bismarck had written to him on January 15, explaining the Prussian position of the right of communication. Bismarck asserted, "As we have, in fact, forwarded Mr. Washburne's dispatches both ways, the question has a theoretical significance only."<sup>26</sup> Bancroft understood this statement to mean that there had been no delays. In a letter to Fish, he implied that Washburne might be mistaken about the delays. His dispatches must be reaching him. He wrote:

My own letters to him appear to have reached him regularly except on one single occasion. The note of Count Bismarck, of January 15, which I lately forwarded to you, states unequivocally that Mr. Washburne's intercourse with the Government is free and uninterrupted. I have heard of no delay but on one occasion; but the unvarying declarations of this government from all its departments preclude the idea that the delay was intentional on their part.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, in this instance, too, Bismarck had not only a friend in Bancroft but also an advocate who argued persuasively on Germany's behalf.

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<sup>25</sup>*Foreign Relations, 1871*, pp. 371-2.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 372.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 374-5.

Fish corrected Bancroft on February 24, and told him that Bismarck himself had admitted delaying the dispatch bags. Bancroft's reaction to this information is unknown because Fish ended the instruction with, "There does not appear to be any necessity for continuing the discussion."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 377.





# *Conclusion*

During the Franco-Prussian War the United States could hardly have been represented in Paris and Berlin by two more dissimilar diplomats, who conceived of their missions in wholly contrasting fashions, and who saw historic developments with very different eyes.

Elihu Benjamin Washburne, American minister to France, concentrated on his protective tasks and neglected his political duties. In his official dispatches, Washburne did not discuss the causes of the war and refrained from analyzing political or military events in the French capital. But he detailed records of his protective services for the citizens of the North German Confederation: he moderated the French expulsion of German citizens by engaging in legal sparring with the French foreign minister; he issued and certified passports to 30,000 persons, procured railroad tickets for 9,500 Germans and distributed small sums to 20,000 destitute people.

Though the humanitarian instinct was present in his protection of German citizens, Washburne undertook the job because it was assigned to him. He was a conscientious man who took pride in doing a job well. He also staunchly supported American neutral rights. With consistent determination, he postulated the American interpretation of the rights of neutral citizens to communicate with their own governments even during a siege. But in the momentous events through which he lived, he lacked the background, experience, training and personal qualities that could have enabled him to help the United States Government to understand, in a broader context, what was happening.

On the other hand, George Bancroft, American minister in Berlin, gave his first attention to political analysis. The State Department benefited from this approach, even though it had to temper Bancroft's enthusiasm a few times. His effect on the formulation of American policy can be seen when Fish used Bancroft's arguments for the American refusal to intervene diplomatically and when Grant employed Bancroft's words and phrases to describe the new German government and constitution.

The problem with Bancroft did not lie in the intellectual quality of his reporting but rather in his one-sided attitude. He certainly possessed an unusually broad background as a historian, but as a diplomat—who is supposed to think in terms of the national interest—his views tended to be simplistic. His excessive admiration of Bismarck and Prussia colored his perceptions, so that essentially he argued the Prussian cause incessantly. This might have been less of a problem if his reporting, analyses and policy recommendations had been counterbalanced by the American legation in Paris.

The background of the two ministers, their lack of diplomatic experience,

as well as their individual personalities and abilities, account for the different ways in which they approached their assignments. Washburne was a legal-minded, financially cautious politician who had been given an "easy" appointment as a reward for his faithful and long service in Congress and for his help in promoting the military career of Ulysses S. Grant. Bancroft was a noted historian who had been educated in Germany, who saw his democratic ideals being enacted in the unification of Germany under Bismarck.

Washburne was a friend of Napoleon III, and he admired him. Before the war broke out, he believed that the French Emperor was seeking a liberal, constitutionally limited government. Afterward, Washburne welcomed the new republic but did not give Washington any in-depth discussion of the men in the government—what were their views and perspectives, or what effect they would have either in France or on the course of the war. Bancroft, friend of Bismarck, pleaded on behalf of Prussia and the German Reich. He enthusiastically drew parallels between German unification and American federalism while consistently ignoring their important differences. Bancroft's biased information was based on his profound belief in liberalism and idealism, but he was also subject to manipulation by Bismarck.

Other Americans in Paris and Berlin did not compensate for the weaknesses of Washburne and Bancroft. In Paris, Hoffman, the secretary to the American legation and chargé d'affaires in July, 1870, did report on the deeper causes of the war. He recognized that the Franco-Prussian antagonism had roots in the 1860s with the rise of Bismarck and Prussia as a potential challenge to France's power. But the cost-consciousness of Washburne, the "Watchdog of the Treasury", contributed to the deplorable decision of Hoffman as chargé to send reports about the Parisian response to Leopold's candidacy by regular mail rather than by cable. Moreover, once Washburne returned from Carlsbad in July, 1870, the Paris dispatches became again simple chronicles of events in Paris rather than an assessment of why or how events happened. There is no evidence that Washburne systematically developed contacts in and outside of the governments and that he attempted to gather the kind of information that would have allowed him to send reasoned assessments to Washington.

The two consuls, Read in Paris and Kreismann in Berlin, did not add to the State Department's understanding of what was happening. Read apparently did not want to infringe upon the Legation's functions, jealously guarded by Washburne. Kreismann provided auxiliary information (especially on the war's effect on the import and export trade) but did not influence or counterbalance Bancroft's picture of a nascent German democracy threatened by an aggressive, evil France. His admiration for Bancroft and his own German heritage did not make him an impartial observer of the Franco-Prussian War.

Thus, the two ministers served Washington inadequately in very different ways. Washburne, the run-of-the-mine politician with no special diplomatic

training or insight, was a methodical and conscientious worker, but not a perceptive commentator. He rarely wrote of political events, and when he did, he perpetuated the stereotype of an imperial, aggressive France even after the empire fell and the new provisional republic was attempting to survive. Bancroft, the ardent champion of liberalism and democracy, enthusiastically supported the Iron Chancellor without understanding that Bismarck was basically neither a liberal nor a democrat, and that the new German Reich was an authoritarian creation behind parliamentary window dressing.

In short, from neither representative did Washington derive anything approaching a clear picture of political developments. But because neither the two capitals, nor the war, were vital for American interests in 1870 and 1871, the diversity of perceptions of these two untrained diplomats wrought no real harm.



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