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In March 1881, the defeated Zulu king was being held prisoner at the Cape when he dictated a letter to the Governor, Sir Hercules Robinson. Via his interpreter, Cetshwayo poignantly stated,

Mpande did you no wrong, I have done you no wrong, therefore you must have some other object in view in invading my land. (1)

That 'other object' has remained elusive to the Zulus as well as to numerous historians and writers on Zulu affairs. The majority of popular authors dealing with the Anglo Zulu war still rely heavily or exclusively on the Zulu refusal to comply with the British ultimatum of December 1878 as the rationale for the war. These writers' sources are invariably based on contemporary accounts which were highly subjective; there were important reputations to preserve and sufficient scapegoats abounded, some conveniently dead. Military accounts of the day tended to rely on the official and worthy *Narrative of Field Operations* (2) but that narrative refrained from any allusion of controversy. Perhaps the most honest explanation can be credited to Laband and Thompson's *Field Guide to the War in Zululand* in which they state, 'there is still no general agreement on the causes of the Anglo Zulu War'. (3)

### **Confederation - its role in British foreign policy in southern Africa**

In order to understand the background to the Anglo Zulu war, progressive British foreign policy towards Confederation as a means of successfully administering the colonies must first be reviewed. This policy is important because it directly influenced a number of complex issues which closely relate to the period leading immediately to war in 1879. Confederation entailed the unification of either a fragmented colony, a large single territory, or a collection of neighbouring territories and then unifying them under one central administration. With such an administration in place, a reliable and stable policy could be adopted to control economic production and resulting trade, usually for the benefit of Britain. Such a unified area could then develop its own military system, albeit trained and supervised by British officers, which neatly solved the problem of Britain supplying and maintaining hugely expensive Imperial troops for distant peacekeeping.

During the 1870s, Confederation was becoming an increasingly important factor in British foreign policy following its successful implementation in lands as various and distant as India, Australia, The Leeward Islands and most recently and successfully, Canada. The policy of Confederation developed as a result of expensive lessons learned by Britain while administering her other distant colonies and lands; without Imperial administration and economic policies, such responsibilities were a heavy financial burden on Britain.

With such a policy, these areas flourished; they even became self-supporting and in due course highly profitable trade with Britain resulted. The same system of Confederation had recently been introduced throughout Canada under the guidance of Lord Carnarvon, then Colonial Secretary, and, it is in the light of this particular success that Confederation was considered essential for southern Africa, especially with its diverse and mutually antagonistic populations.

Other factors were also beginning to emerge which sharply focused British attention on the urgency of confederating the region. In October 1867, an unexpectedly large number of diamonds were discovered at the junction of the Orange and Vaal rivers and the location was most inconvenient for Britain. Jurisdiction of the area was disputed between the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, while unhindered, many thousands of prospectors headed for the district from all over the world. These hardy prospectors ignored any form of local administration and the financial potential of further discoveries was becoming increasingly apparent from evidence, which indicated the promise of great wealth and its associated commercial possibilities. In 1871, Britain deftly resolved the matter, under some protest from the Free State (4), by annexing the whole area to the Crown along with the neighbouring territory of Basutoland. Carnarvon then initiated the process of Confederation by appointing Sir Bartle Frere as High Commissioner to South Africa and Governor of the Cape.

Since the Boers first crossed the Drakensberg Mountains in 1836, their settlements had continued to spread progressively towards the heartland of Zululand, itself protected by a natural boundary, the Tugela River. This temporarily deterred further encroachment by the Boers. By the mid 1870s, Boer settlers again began surreptitiously moving into Zululand and these incursions were opposed with increasing vigour. One such area of heightened tension was an unofficial extension of the (Boer) Transvaal into Zululand which lay between the Buffalo and Blood rivers immediately north of Rorke's Drift. It was evident to the British, Boers and Zulu that relationships between the Boers and Zulu were seriously deteriorating and decisive action needed to be taken with increasing urgency.

The Zulu king, Cetshwayo, had traditionally regarded the encroaching Boers as his enemy and treated them with great suspicion, whereas he regarded the British as his true friends. During April 1877, a serious

confrontation between the Zulus and Boers began to develop as a result of trekkers moving onto land unanimously recognised to be Zulu territory. The king finally decided to resolve the problem by massing his combined impis, amounting to over thirty thousand warriors, at strategic crossing points along the Boers' Transvaal border.

Before King Cetshwayo could give the order for a full scale Zulu attack, two events occurred simultaneously, either by coincidence or by astute British diplomatic design. Firstly, the Secretary for Native Affairs, Sir Theophilus Shepstone, ordered the king to withdraw his army. King Cetshwayo reluctantly complied but sent a strong letter warning Shepstone that he had intended driving the Boers 'beyond the Vaal River'(5). Secondly, on the very same day, (12th April 1877), Shepstone was actually attending a secret meeting with the Boers, with the sole intention of persuading the Boers to surrender the Transvaal to British authority, on the logical grounds that the Transvaal government was bankrupt and the Zulus were about to attack.

Shepstone had previously enjoyed the Zulu title 'father', now the king described him as a 'cheat' and a 'fraud'. Shepstone wrote to Lord Carnarvon that "The sooner the root of the evil, which I consider to be the Zulu power and military organisation, is dealt with, the easier our task will be". Letter dated 11th December 1877.

Agreement was quickly reached whereupon Shepstone then and there annexed the Transvaal to the Crown. The declaration was read to the assembled Boers by the Secretary to the Mission, Melmoth Osbourne. He appeared to suffer from a bout of chronic anxiety mid-proclamation; he commenced trembling and his voice failed, Shepstone's twenty-year-old clerk, H. Rider Haggard, had to continue reading the script. The Zulus believe to this day that Shepstone encouraged Cetshwayo to amass his impis on the Transvaal border in order to coerce the Boers into submission.

Shepstone's motive behind this annexation was to initiate Britain's policy of Confederation across southern Africa but in pursuing this policy, Shepstone had unwittingly inherited responsibility for the developing Boer and Zulu land dispute. Prior to annexation, the British had viewed the Boers as 'foreigners'. Now that these people had involuntarily become British subjects by virtue of the annexation, the problem of the disputed territory converted itself from being an insignificant Boer-Zulu controversy into a potentially serious dispute between Britain and the Zulus. The Zulu king, Cetshwayo, had welcomed the British annexation of the Transvaal, as he believed it would protect Zululand from further Boer attention. King Cetshwayo informed Shepstone,

I am glad to know the Transvaal is English ground; perhaps now there may be rest. (6)

Mr. Rider Haggard wrote that the financial effects of annexation on the Transvaalers were magical, credit and commerce were at once restored", he was to write, only a few months later that "when the recollection of their difficulties had grown feint, when their debts had been paid and their enemies (Zulus) quietened, they began to think that they would like to get rid of us again, and start fresh on their own account with a clean sheet. (7)

Matters again came to a head during early 1878 when a number of Boer and displaced native settlers joined those already illicitly farming on a particularly sensitive Zulu area - the same area which was generally becoming known as the 'disputed territory' directly to the north of Rorke's Drift.

In the British tradition of apparent compromise, Frere deferred the problem by reluctantly constituting an independent Boundary Commission; this was at the persistent request of the Governor of Natal, Sir Henry Bulwer, a long time friend of the Zulu people. The Commission was to adjudicate on title to the disputed territory. Cetshwayo was consulted and he agreed to abide by the Commission's decision on condition he could nominate three senior indunas to participate. The Commission's principle members consisted of three highly respected officials led by Michael Gallwey, a barrister who had become the Attorney General of Natal in 1857 at the age of thirty one. Lt.Col. Anthony Durnford R.E., who had served in South Africa for many years and knew the area and the Zulu thoroughly and John Shepstone, brother and deputy of the Secretary for Native Affairs. The Boers sent Piet Uys, a farmer who had lost relatives to Dingane's impis; Adrian Rudolph, the Boer Landdrost (8) of Utrecht and curiously, Henrique Shepstone who served on his father's staff in Pretoria.

The Commission sat for nearly five weeks during which time they considered voluminous verbal and written representations. Gallwey utilised all his legal training to impartially evaluate the material, a task made especially difficult because several Boer documents proved to be fraudulent while a number of Zulu reports were manifestly unreliable. Gallwey concentrated the Commission's attention on two main issues

1. who owned the land prior to the dispute?, and
2. had any land under dispute been properly purchased or ceded?

It has to be remembered that between the Zulus and Boers no boundary line had ever been agreed, and that for many years the local Zulu chiefs had repeatedly implored the British Governor in Natal for advice and help in dealing with examples of Boer aggression. It had long been Boer policy - if policy it may be called - to force the

Zulus gradually to edge further and further from their rich pasture lands. Hitherto, little notice had been taken of their petitions. The Boundary Commission finally decided that the disputed land had always belonged to the Zulus and furthermore, the Boer settlement of Utrecht must also be surrendered. The Boundary Commission eventually delivered their stunning verdict in July 1878 to an astonished Sir Bartle Frere.

On the 28th July 1878, an incident occurred which Frere used to encourage widespread anti Zulu sentiments. Some of the sons of a local chief, Sihayo, crossed the river border to restrain two of their father's absconding wives who had been accused of adultery. They were duly apprehended and marched back across the border, only to be clubbed to death in accordance with established Zulu tradition. The incident received officially orchestrated publicity, out of all proportion to the event, in order to further inflame public antagonism against King Cetshwayo (9). Even the pro-Zulu Bulwer was forced to agree that the danger of collision with the Zulu was growing and wrote that,

the system of government in the Zulu country is so bad that any improvement was hopeless - we should, if necessary, be justified in deposing Cetshwayo.(10)

After hasty and delicate discussions, Frere was obliged to realise that publication of the Commission's findings could unleash powerful forces against Britain, both from native nations who would believe their campaign against progressive European settlement was vindicated and from furious Boers who could well retaliate against Britain by resorting to military action against British controlled Natal - which, in turn, might provoke additional antagonism from a number of the Boers' European allies, especially Holland and Germany. This possible complication would be most inconvenient, as Britain was becoming seriously engaged in war against Afghanistan and relationships with Russia were deteriorating.

Frere had not been idle since activating the Boundary Commission. He and his staff, encouraged by Shepstone in the Transvaal, had wrongly anticipated that the Commission would find for the Boers (11) and Shepstone accordingly believed that the Zulus might retaliate against Britain with a military offensive into Natal. In consequence, plans were already well advanced for a British pre-emptive invasion of Zululand.

Such an invasion had a number of attractive incentives. The Zulus were blocking British progress to the north and their defeat would facilitate Confederation. It would also placate the Boers and such a display of force would certainly impress other Bantu nations who might consider making a stand against British expansion. Invasion would overturn the Zulu king by eradicating his military potential and freeing a valuable source of labour for British and Boer commercial activities. Frere ordered his General Commanding British Forces in South Africa, Sir Frederic Thesiger, (shortly to become Lord Chelmsford), to proceed to Natal to secretly prepare his forces for an immediate and brief war against the Zulus. There were also important personal considerations for both Frere and Chelmsford; success for Frere would strengthen his already glittering career and for Chelmsford an early defeat of the Zulu army would be popular and ensure him an heroic return to England. Meanwhile, Frere pondered the Boundary Commission's findings and decided that inactivity was the best, if temporary, solution.

He gained more time by forwarding the report to Hicks Beach, the new Colonial Secretary in London (who had succeeded Lord Carnarvon). He also requested additional Imperial troops, ostensibly to protect Natal and the Boer families still within the area. Frere knew full well that Hicks Beach's official reply would take several months to reach him.

On the 9th October, an incident occurred which precipitated action by Frere. A local chief, Mbelini, led his warriors through the Pongola Valley in the area under dispute, attacking immigrant Boers and natives and stealing herds of their cattle. Frere was already in the process of devising an ultimatum which he and his advisors knew would be impossible for Cetshwayo to accept. It would also negate the Boundary Commission's report and justify his war against the Zulus. The raid by Mbelini formed the basis of the first item in the ultimatum.

Eventually, on the 11th December 1878, Zulu representatives were summoned to the site of a shady tree (12) on the Natal bank of the Tugela River to learn the result of the Boundary Commission's deliberations. John Shepstone (13) represented the British officials, while Cetshwayo sent three of his senior inDunas together with eleven chieftains and their retainers to listen to the findings. Writing was unknown to the Zulus, who were nevertheless accomplished at memorising even lengthy speeches and which probably accounts for the number of senior Zulu representatives, who would have to corroborate each other when they reported to Cetshwayo.

The findings were relayed to the Zulu officials but in heavily worded terms designed to cause confusion. The hitherto secret ultimatum was then read to the astonished Zulus who then anxiously set off to report the terms of the ultimatum to Cetshwayo. (14)

## **The main requirements of the ultimatum included –**

### **Conditions to be fully met within twenty days**

1. The surrender to the British of the Swazi Chief, Mbilini, (for cattle raiding).
2. The surrender of Chief Sihayo's two sons (for crossing the river border into Natal, abducting and then murdering two of Sihayo's adulterous wives) plus a fine of 500 cattle.
3. A fine of 100 cattle for having molested two British surveyors, Deighton and Smith, at a border crossing.

### **Conditions to be fully met within thirty days**

1. A number of prominent Zulus were to be surrendered for trial (no names were specified).
2. Summary executions were forbidden.
3. The Zulu army was to disband.
4. The Zulu military system was to be abandoned.
5. Every Zulu was to be free to marry.
6. Missionaries were to be re-admitted to Zululand without let or hindrance.
7. A British resident official was to oversee Zulu affairs.
8. Any dispute involving a European was to be dealt with under British jurisdiction.

In the meantime, the British invasion force was already advancing towards the borders of Zululand in total confidence that Cetshwayo could not comply with the ultimatum. Hicks Beach's reply finally reached Frere and it was, as Frere anticipated, an indication that Hicks Beach was uninterested in southern Africa. It contained little more than a request that caution must be exercised. The reply read,

Her Majesty's Government are (sic) not prepared to comply with a request for reinforcement of troops. All the information that has hitherto reached them with respect to the position of affairs in Zululand appears to justify a confident hope that by the exercise of prudence and by meeting the Zulus in a spirit of forbearance and reasonable compromise it will be possible to avert the very serious evil of a war with Cetshwayo. (15)

Frere interpreted Hicks Beach's reply as inferring authority to initiate a local war and, once started, he was fully aware that the British government was powerless to stop him. It took at least ten weeks for a message to travel to London and back; his exploitation of the delay, on the grounds of the tension and urgency he had created, was blatant.

For Cetshwayo, five years of comparative peace were about to end. During his reign a number of minor incidents had occurred along his distant borders but they were petty and of no real concern to the British. Cetshwayo was in total control of his country and he maintained his authority with an available army of over fifty thousand warriors spread over at least thirty regiments. The purpose of the Zulu army is one aspect of Zulu life which has frequently been misunderstood.

Since Shaka, young men had been obliged to serve in the army as a means of binding the nation together. The units, or amabutho, were the king's active service units and in peacetime gave service at the king's command or were employed as tax officials or in undertaking policing duties. These warriors remained in their regimental amabutho until the king authorised their 'marriage'; this was another misunderstood concept which has often led to some confusion. Zulu marriage has invariably been interpreted through European eyes with overtones of repressed Freudian sexuality and transposed with European values of marriage. To a Zulu, marriage denoted the most significant event of his life by giving him the right to take a number of wives; he was free to establish his personal kraal and he could own land for his cattle and crops. The king controlled 'marriage' as a means of keeping his young men under arms and out of the economic structure of Zululand. Had every warrior been permitted to establish his own kraal at will, the effect on various Zulu social processes - including production and reproduction, would have resulted in general instability. Concomitantly, by delaying the time when Zulu women could marry, the growth and pressure of an increasing population could be strictly controlled and the Zulu birth rate maintained in line with economic production. (16)

By the end of September 1878, Cetshwayo was fully aware that events were rapidly moving beyond his control (17) and from his royal kraal on the rolling Mahlabathini plain, he mobilised the Zulu army to assemble before him. He also ordered wild animal hunts to be held along the borders of the neighbouring territories and these were instructed to ensure that they were observed by Shepstone's spies. By the time the ultimatum reached Cetshwayo, most of the amabutho (18) were already gathered and the ritual preparations for war began. Notwithstanding soothing reassurances from Shepstone, Cetshwayo was not to be caught off balance, shrewdly, he decided to wait and watch. He sent a number of induna emissaries to implore British restraint but on presentation of their credentials they were arrested and imprisoned.

Cetshwayo knew exactly where the British were amassing their forces and correctly presumed their objective (19). Perhaps because Lord Chelmsford was accompanying the centre column, Cetshwayo singled it out as being the most dangerous force. The time for peaceful negotiation had passed; both sides were ready for war.

## SUMMARY

**The causes of the Anglo Zulu War can be summarised as follows-**

1. To further British policy of Confederation throughout southern Africa.
2. To subdue the Zulu in order to
  - a. win favour with the Boers, (over the issue of boundary disputes, an Anglo Zulu war was preferable to an Anglo Boer war),
  - b. repress widespread black resistance to expanding white domination, and
  - c. prevent the Zulu blocking British progress and expansion to the north.
3. To gain personal prestige for Frere and, to a lesser degree, Lord Chelmsford.
4. To free Zulu manpower resources for labour hungry European commercialism\*.

\*Sir Theophilus Shepstone wrote;

Had Cetshwayo's thirty thousand warriors been in time changed to labourers working for wages, Zululand would have been a prosperous peaceful country instead of what it is now, a source of perpetual danger to itself and its neighbours. Letter dated 1878

### **Additional Information;**

- i. Without doubt, Boer - Zulu confrontation up to 1878 was steadily maturing to the point of a full scale war. Having been 'crowned' in 1873 by Shepstone in the name of Queen Victoria, Cetshwayo certainly considered the British to be his ally. Indeed, it was in Britain's interest to support the Zulus to deny the Boers access to the sea - one of the principle Boer objectives during the later Boer War.
- ii. When Britain allied itself to the Boer cause and prepared for war against the Zulu, Sir Bartle Frere made representations to the Boers for support. Following a meeting at Utrecht on the 5th December 1878 between Col. Wood V.C. and local Boers, Wood was confident of having several thousand Boers under his command. Three days later the Boers discovered that the Boundary Commission had found against them. Realising the deception, the Boers accordingly withheld their support - with the exception of isolated individuals, most notably Piet Uys, whose father and brother had been killed by the Zulu.
- iii. Whatever view one has of Zulu history, it cannot be denied that by the time the Anglo Zulu War commenced, successive Zulu kings had efficiently controlled the development of Zulu social organisation and ensured a comparatively healthy and prosperous population.
- iv. Any traveller in modern Zululand cannot but witness the disastrous effect of modern uncontrolled native population growth and associated livestock grazing on both the land and general environment. Vast tracts of previously fertile countryside have been effectively destroyed by such widespread casual overgrazing, and each time the local population has moved to fresh pastures, they unwittingly repeat the process, again and again.
- v. A British politician's view of Confederation,  
**Confederation will involve, we hope, self defence, which will remove the liability under which we labour of spending our blood and money upon these wretched Kaffir quarrels in South Africa.**

Lord Cadogan Hansard, 25th March 1879

## References

1. Mpande - father of King Cetshwayo
2. *Narrative of the Field Operations connected with the Zulu War of 1879*, The War Office, 1881
3. *Field Guide to the War in Zululand and the Defence of Natal*, Laband and Thompson University of Natal Press.
4. ....who nevertheless gratefully accepted £90,000 as compensation
5. *Zulu Battle Piece*, Sir Reginald Copeland, Collins 1948
6. Letter from King Cetshwayo on learning of the annexation of the Transvaal.
7. *The political Web*, 1900, Louis Creswicke
8. *Landdrost*, A Boer regional official, usually elected.
9. Shepstone had commenced this policy of subversion against King Cetshwayo in a report to Lord Carnarvon dated 11<sup>th</sup> December 1877 in which he wrote “The sooner the root of the evil, which I consider the Zulu power and military organisation, is dealt with, the easier our task will be.”
10. Louis Creswicke quoting Sir Henry Bulwer in *The Zulu War*, 1900
11. It is interesting that Col. Durnford, backed by Bulwer, fiercely opposed several attempts by Frere to tamper with the Commission’s findings
12. Today, the tree stump, a national monument, languishes in the shade of a motorway.
13. John Shepstone was an insensitive choice for several reasons;
  - a. He was the brother and deputy of the Secretary for Native Affairs, Sir Theophilus Shepstone.
  - b. He was actually working for the Boers at the time of the Commission, and whilst it could be argued that he could therefore represent the Boers, he caused confusion to the Zulu by announcing the findings on behalf of the British.
  - c. He was infamous with the Zulu. Shepstone had once led a party which tracked down a wanted Zulu chief, Matyana; Shepstone arranged a meeting of reconciliation on condition no one in either party would be armed. Matyana accepted the terms and attended, only to be shot and wounded by Shepstone, Matyana escaped and John Shepstone lost both his captive and his reputation.
14. King Cetshwayo had a reputation for executing the messengers of bad news and, understandably, his emissaries tarried. A white resident, John Dunn, duly learned of the ultimatum and sent his own messenger to King Cetshwayo with advance warning.
15. *Zulu Battle Piece*, Sir Reginald Copeland, Collins 1948
16. See editor’s note iv. post article
17. Long after the cessation of war, King Cetshwayo still maintained that he never understood the purpose behind Britain’s invasion of Zululand, especially as, after the final battle at Ulundi, British troops withdrew from Zululand.
18. Apart from drawing young men into an *amabutho* or unit for military and work purposes, it also served to accustom warriors into identifying the Zulu king as their leader, regardless of their origins. However, where young men came from an outlying area or had recently been absorbed into the Zulu, they were allocated menial work and were known as *amalala* (menials), *amanhlwenga* (destitutes) or *iziendane* (unusual hairstyles).
19. Chelmsford’s tactics using three columns to approach and surround Ulundi was a direct copy of the Zulu *Impondo Zankhomo* tactic. King Cetshwayo would certainly have noticed the irony, and his understanding of the intricacies of the technique is perhaps one reason why the Zulu army were able to impose such a stunning defeat on the British at Isandlwana.