

“No Sort of Parallel”: American Press Coverage of the Anglo-Zulu War.

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The relations of Britain and the United States through the 19th century were occasionally complex, often heated, and rarely less than strained. The two countries were at war from 1812 to 1815 and stood on the brink of war on several more occasions over the following decades, notably in 1837, 1839, 1859, and 1861. American support of Canadian rebels and Fenians, and British neutrality in the Civil War, along with a number of simmering border disputes, occasionally whipped up hysteria on both sides. The long history of American Anglophobia, and the corresponding British antipathy toward her former colony, deserve far more attention than can be spared here, but suffice it to say that the ‘Special Relationship’ of recent years simply did not exist in the 19th century.

However, most historians of Anglo-American relations do note a gradual change in the transatlantic relationship over the years: roughly between the 1860s, when tensions arguably came closest to open war, and the 1940s, when military and political co-operation culminated in the joint invasion of Nazi Europe.⁽¹⁾ In the 1870s, Anglo-American relations had improved from their recent nadir in the Trent Affair of 1861, and the Treaty of Washington (1871) marked the beginning of a gradual thaw, as Britain paid compensation for the construction of the CSS *Alabama* and submitted the US-Canadian boundary dispute to arbitration. Analysis of the reaction to a British colonial campaign in the same period can give some indication of the trend in Anglo-American relations, or at least the trend in American perceptions of Britain.

It can be instructive also to consider the interest shown in foreign campaigns by the general public. The Falklands conflict provided great entertainment value for American cable news channels, famously covered under the title “The Empire Strikes Back” on CNN. British involvement in the World Wars was followed eagerly by the American public, as had been the Second Anglo-Boer War. In Britain, the American Civil War was followed with interest and some volunteers even joined the fray. On the other hand, America’s Indian Wars and most of Britain’s imperial campaigns merited nothing more than a few sentences in the other country’s newspapers, much as minor wars and civil conflicts in the developing world are largely ignored by today’s press and public. The Anglo-Zulu War was no exception. The roots of the conflict, and its opening movements, were barely given any attention by the major American newspapers. The *New York Times* covered the basics of the conflict with a few sentences every few days, crammed between news of Scottish fraud trials, Italian parliamentary proceedings, and the ongoing world tour of former President Grant. The *Washington Post* did not mention the war at all. The progress of a seemingly minor British colonial campaign on the far side of the world barely registered on the consciousness of America, and what little appeared in the newspapers came from wire reports by British journalists (this remained the case throughout the war – no American correspondents seem to have been dispatched to South Africa).

All that was to change, however, on 11 February 1879, when the news broke of a British disaster on a barely-pronounceable hillside in Zululand. The news, which had been received in London in time for the second edition of the *Times* and in time for the British evening papers, was given top billing in the morning editions of the major US dailies. This was thanks to the time difference that meant it was still the middle of the night when Chelmsford’s telegraphed report relayed into the transatlantic telegraph station at Heart’s Content in Newfoundland. The *New York Times* led with the story, under the headline “A British Column Routed: Disastrous Fighting In South Africa”, and the other major US dailies gave the story similar prominence.

From then on, as in Britain, the progress of the conflict in Zululand was big news. From this point also, editorial commentary (entirely absent in the few early reports) became increasingly frequent, offering a window into American attitudes towards the war. The day after the Isandlwana report, the *New York Times* carried in its editorial pages a blistering attack on British colonial policy:

The world will charge the bloody disaster which has overtaken the British Army in South Africa to the aggressive colonial policy of the British Government ... The history of British colonization in Africa is, like that of its progress in all barbarous and semi-barbarous countries, a history of persistent encroachment and bullying, invariably ending in conquest ... The Disraeli Administration have pushed British arms everywhere, and the British people have been dazzled with the spectacle of British imperialism extending itself, almost unopposed, in all quarters of the globe. It should not be forgotten that the battle which is now spreading mourning and lamentation throughout England was the direct result of a determination to seize the territory of a tribe of natives and extinguish their original title. It is because the Zulu country was wantonly

invaded that a British column has been annihilated, its colors captured, and English homes made desolate. (2)

The following day the *Washington Post* published a similar editorial piece, less vociferous but with some traces of dark humour, remarking that the Zulu “constitute a formidable enemy and will give their British masters a good deal of trouble before they are finally captured and fired from the mouths of cannon *a la Sepoy*”. (3) Another article in the same issue remarked, more forcefully:

John Bull has been a little awkward and rather slow in getting in his work on the Zulus ... But terrible atonement will be made for this blundering, and the Zulus will eventually be crushed into abject submission. England never allows herself to have much trouble in chastising a small power. (4)

Thus, the commentaries in both papers early on struck an anti-imperialist tone, critical of the Disraeli administration’s policies, and overtly sympathetic to the plight of the Zulu. They were not unmindful, however, of the similarities between the Anglo-Zulu War and the United States’ own wars against smaller powers. The *Washington Post* article quoted above also commented that the British campaign “was very much like one of Gen. Howard’s great military movements against the Indians”, a reference to General Oliver O. Howard, whose campaign against the Nez Perce had dominated the headlines two years before. (5)

A more direct similarity had been noted in the *Post* of the day before, which commented that “England has found the Zulus of South Africa as formidable a foe as our Sioux Indians. The fate of the eight hundred troops sent to attack them is very much like that which overtook Custer and his command at Little Big Horn.” (6) The similarities must have been apparent to most who knew the circumstances, as the *New York Times* came to a similar conclusion that same day:

In some particulars, the Zulu disaster resembles that which overtook Custer’s band on the Big Horn. The invaders were entrapped into a fight with a force which vastly outnumbered their own, and the precise position and size of which they did not know. The white men fought bravely, and were overwhelmed by the tremendous odds against them. (7)

The editorial went on to argue, somewhat defensively, “We, in America, have our own sins in this particular to answer for, and the management of our own savage tribes is by no means above reproach. But the policy of Great Britain, in respect of helpless native races is more deliberate.” (8)

The *Post* two days later was less circumspect on equating American and British colonial policy:

“England’s Zulu policy, whereby she drives the natives from point to point and takes their territory, is little short of barbarism. If the British needed the land to live in, it would be perfectly proper to starve them to death by means of Indian agents. But there is no sort of parallel between England’s case and ours.”(9)

American sentiment seems to have been roughly divided into those who sympathised with a fellow Anglo-Saxon power bringing civilisation to the “savages”, those who railed against the imperialism of Disraeli, and those who did the same but recognised that American policy was not altogether different. All of these attitudes were manifested in editorials through 1879. The *New York Times* drew an explicit comparison that November, in a commentary on the ongoing war against the Ute tribe:

It was determined that these people, who really “did not know when they were well off”, should be compelled to better themselves ... In the same lofty temper, the English Army has been hunting Zulus as wild boars are hunted in Germany. We have had no general battle in the Ute country, as the English philanthropists have had in South Africa, each valiant soldier counting the heads of his slain as a mighty Nimrod might sum up his day’s sport. Our soldiers did their whole duty manfully, and because someone else had provoked a fight that must be checked. But the end is pretty much the same as in the case of the followers of Cetywayo ... Perhaps this is destiny, as hurried on by the American people. But it is impossible not to feel at least a passing pang of commiseration for a tribe thus systematically improved off the face of the earth. (10)

The conflicting sentiments of sympathy for the conquered and empathy for the conquerors are apparent in much of the editorial comment on the Anglo-Zulu War, marking the gradual segue from overt hostility to British imperialism (such as characterised the 1830s and 1840s) to Rooseveltian theories of Anglo-Saxon racial imperialism. (11) Elements of both philosophies can be traced in the pages of the major newspapers through 1879, marking the coverage of the Anglo-Zulu War as an important milestone in the changing nature of Anglo-American relations.

The editorial coverage of the war was not characterised solely by pro- or anti-imperial attitudes and comparisons with American wars, however. As with the British press coverage, other aspects of the campaign captured the public imagination and served to differentiate the war from the dozens of dusty colonial enterprises, from New Zealand to Nigeria, that kept European armies busy throughout the 19th century. The presence of “star” power, in the form of the Prince Imperial, Louis Napoleon, always guaranteed press interest, and never more so than after his death at the hands of the Zulu. The event grabbed attention around the world, the American press proving no exception:

The dynasty that was nursed among the mountains of Corsica comes to an end amid the pathless wilderness of South Africa; the boy that was born in the purple just as the treaty of Paris put its seal on the greatness of the third Empire, and whom all the world hailed as the assured successor to a throne not less sure than the oldest in Europe, has gone down with the last remnant of the heritage of the man of destiny in a skirmish with nameless savages. (12)

The nameless savages themselves seemed to fascinate both press and public, as they did across the Atlantic. Eulogies to the bravery of the Zulu warrior became standard in reports of the campaign. The *Washington Post* commented on 25 March that Lord Chelmsford “appears to have despised the Zulus, and to have had only contempt for their martial prowess. He was compelled to learn something of their character and fighting qualities at an awful sacrifice.”(13) Even articles seemingly supportive of British war aims could hardly resist penning paeans of praise for the defeated enemy, although often in the form of singularly backhanded compliments. The *Post* remarked, on 9 April, that “It is becoming evident that if Mr. J. Bull intends to crush out this insurrection at all, he has got to proceed immediately and in force. The Zulus have so far demonstrated their entire ability to exercise their cannibalistic qualities on such small forces as are sent against them with little inconvenience to themselves.” (14) And the *New York Times*, on 31 May:

A race with such splendid obstinacy, and capable of such marvelous feats of bravery as the Zulus, ought to have great possibilities in them, though it is quite possible that the type has already reached the highest development of which it is capable, and that with inevitable defeat will come the too familiar process of demoralization.(15)

Often enough though, the praise was voiced without reservation. The *Washington Post* noted, after the war was through: “Probably in all her aggressive career England has never been so surprised as she was by that first Zulu victory. Their savage bravery and utterly reckless daring has become an old story through all these months...” (16) And on 23 April, in yet another comparison with the Indian Wars:

The Zulus are more formidable fighters than the American savages. They take the open field in masses, and crush inferior forces by impetuous charges. They have shown such courage as has seldom been surpassed by any people. “As brave as a Zulu” is likely to become a common phrase for eulogistic use. (17)

The *Post*, for whom snappy, sarcastic one-liners were stock-in-trade at the time, summed up its view of the war on 25 April (following the news of the outcome at Gingindlovu): “It has cost England a good sum of money to discover just how many British soldiers it takes to whip one Zulu. But she thinks she knows now.”(18) The *Post* was not alone in eulogising Zulu qualities. The *New York Times*, commenting on the Battle of Ulundi, maintained that “men who could attack a square of infantry on open ground “upon all four sides at once”, and persist in their assault for more than an hour in the teeth of Gatling guns and Snider rifles, merit all the praise which can be given to them.” (19)

Yet for all the traces of sympathy with British aims and circumstances, for all the fascination with the more colourful figures and events of the conflict, and for all the admiration of both Zulu and British fighting qualities (the press accounts seem to have veered sharply between praise and criticism of the British soldiers conduct in the war), it was the *causis belli*, and the principles of “Beaconsfieldist” imperialism that it echoed, which ultimately drew most of the attention and the hostility of the American press. The coverage of the Anglo-Zulu war shows some signs of fellow-thinking in consideration of British imperial strategy, but it would be more than a decade before US newspapers felt free to explicitly associate the missions of the two “Anglo-Saxon” empires. (20) Even in later years, American hostility to the British Empire was palpable, but in 1879 it was a defining factor of the coverage. The *New York Times* summed up the major criticism of the war on 25 July:

Sooner or later, the powerful nation was destined to bring the savage tribe into abject submission or demolish it utterly. The justice of the cause had nothing to do with this foregone conclusion ... Never was there a struggle from which a civilized nation could derive less honor, or which it could remember with less pride. That the Zulus were a warlike and somewhat troublesome

people upon the borders of the South African colonies is not disputed, but nations that plant colonies in uncivilized regions, against the will of the original occupants, can hardly expect to find them altogether meek and submissive to whatever restraints may be put in their way....(21)

But it was left to that newspaper's rival, the *New York Tribune*, to succinctly summarise the conflict and its root, at the end of the year that saw the end of Zululand as an independent force in southern Africa:

"The campaign in Zululand is one of the most flagrant crimes in British history ... The real cause of war was a showy scheme of colonial confederation which Sir Bartle Frere had been sent to South Africa to carry into effect. The campaign was as unnecessary as it was unjustifiable."(22)

References.

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2. 'The Disaster in South Africa', *New York Times*, 12 February 1879, p.4
3. 'England's Little Difficulty', *Washington Post*, 13 February 1879, p.2
4. 'Editorial Article', *Washington Post*, 13 February 1879, p.2
5. 'Editorial Article', *Washington Post*, 13 February 1879, p.2
6. 'Editorial Article', *Washington Post*, 12 February 1879, p.2
7. 'The Disaster in South Africa', *New York Times*, 12 February 1879, p.4
8. Ibid.
9. 'Editorial Article', *Washington Post*, 15 February 1879, p.2
10. 'Improving the Utes', *New York Times*, 9 October 1879, p.4
11. For examples of this Anglophobia, see Howard M. Jones, 'Anglophobia and the Aroostook War', *New England Quarterly*, 48:4 (1975), 519-539; and Rebecca B. Matzke, 'Britain Gets Its Way: Power and Peace in Anglo-American Relations, 1838-1846', *War in History*, 8:1 (2001), 19-46
12. 'The Last of a Fallen Dynasty', *New York Times*, 20 June 1879, p.4
13. 'Editorial Article', *Washington Post*, 25 March 1879, p.2
14. 'Editorial Article', *Washington Post*, 9 April 1879, p.2
15. 'Editorial Article', *New York Times*, 31 May 1879, p.4
16. 'The Zulu War', *Washington Post*, 20 September 1879, p.2
17. 'Mr. Bayard's Speech', *Washington Post*, 23 April 1879, p.2
18. 'Editorial Article', *Washington Post*, 25 April 1879, p.2
19. 'Editorial Article', *New York Times*, 24 July 1879, p.4
20. See Paul A. Kramer, 'Empires, Exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons: Race and Rule between the British and United States empires 1880-1910', *Journal of American History*, 88:4 (2002), 1315-53
21. 'The Zulu War', *New York Times* 25 July 1879, p.4
22. 'The Zulu War', *New York Tribune*, 1 January 1880, p.2