

Alive to the Responsibility:
American Imperialism, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Venezuelan Crisis
of 1895

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It is perhaps all too emblematic of South American international politics that one of its ongoing flashpoints can be traced back at least as far as a decision handed down by an international court in 1899, authored jointly by countries whose capitals sit thousands of miles from both each other and the area responsible for the dispute. Indeed, the ease with which a single piece of paper can cause a century or more's worth of international headaches can be a shock to the uninitiated. Yet such pieces of paper and their respective consequences are common in the study of history, and a great number of historians owe their careers to thusly imbued amalgamations of fiber and ink.

The piece of paper in question is the decision authored by an arbitral tribunal in the case of a border dispute between the United States of Venezuela and the colony of British Guiana. Much history is wrapped up in this decision, and the debate that precipitated it itself extends back at least another half-century or more. The best-known part of this debate, however, took place just four years prior to the fateful decision, in the form of the Venezuelan Crisis of 1895. Previous generations of historians have examined the crisis and concluded that it was a brief but intense moment in American diplomatic history, and a mere footnote compared to the far more impactful Spanish-American War of less than three years later. Yet even the most in-depth analyses of the crisis fail to understand it in the context of the ultimate results of the arbitration that followed it. This necessarily forgets that a recent ex-President, Benjamin Harrison, was involved in this arbitration period, serving as chief legal counsel for Venezuela, and had plenty to say for himself on the matter; if we take Harrison at his word, and we understand the period of the crisis and the arbitration as a single ongoing event, the narrative changes significantly.

It is impossible to analyze the Venezuelan Crisis without also dealing with the Monroe Doctrine. This is because the American government reinterpreted it specifically to justify its

intervention in the dispute. This episode reinvigorated the Doctrine and rocketed it to fame in the American popular mind. The implications of this are enormous; echoes of the Doctrine have been heard ever since.

The Venezuelan Crisis of 1895 was a major turning point in American foreign policy and laid the groundwork for a century of American foreign interventions to follow. Current historiography of the Crisis treats the result, that is, the submission of the Venezuela-Guiana dispute to arbitration between Britain and the United States, as the end, and therefore a successful assertion of America's sphere of influence; it acknowledges but brushes aside the fact that most of the territory was ultimately handed over to Britain. Benjamin Harrison's writings on the arbitration paint the crisis instead as ultimately a failure in the face of the British empire. He, along with Walter Q. Gresham and Charles H. Grosvenor, both to be discussed later, saw to it that three Midwesterners, the former two Hoosiers, would play an outsized role in the crisis. Meanwhile, the crisis gave rise to a century-long tradition of interpreting and reinterpreting the Monroe Doctrine to assert American imperial interests, and the Doctrine itself became an accepted euphemism, in the American popular mind, for imperialist activity.

The historiography of the Venezuelan Crisis has two standout analyses. These are authored by historians Walter LaFeber and R. A. Humphreys. LaFeber's text contains an entire chapter on the crisis and does an excellent job of setting up the international context that drove the Cleveland administration to take up Venezuela's case. He highlights other European incursions on the American continent that were either ongoing or had recently taken place that were the source of growing concern among the administration. He also argues that the Monroe Doctrine as articulated by American Secretary of State Richard Olney was merely a convenient

tool to justify America's involvement. Had it not existed, he argues, Olney would have done just as well finding something else to make his point.¹

Humphreys' address provides a full picture of the crisis and of the border dispute that precipitated it, beginning with its roots in eighteenth-century colonial border friction. He provides a view of the crisis from the British perspective with analysis of Lord Salisbury's and Sir Julian Pauncefote's (Prime Minister and British ambassador to Washington, respectively) personal papers. One may surmise that because of his perspective he would be sympathetic to the British view of the affair, but this is not quite the case. He makes clear that British officials, and Salisbury in particular, had misjudged American intentions and seriousness at nearly every step of the way until the delivery of Cleveland's message to Congress.²

Robert L. Beisner's *From the Old Diplomacy to the New, 1865-1900* provides a general overview of American foreign policy during the period. He argues that there was a substantial change in the American approach to foreign policy that began in the 1890s. Prior to then, inasmuch as it existed, American foreign policy had been disjointed, disorganized, and reactive, with no particular goal in mind. The 1890s saw a shift to a more cohesive, rational, and focused foreign policy that was geared toward protecting American business interests and securing markets for American goods. He only briefly deals with the Venezuela Crisis and only as something of a test case for the new approach to American foreign policy. He characterizes the reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine to suit the crisis as one that "must have sent the fifth president spinning in his grave."³ He also concludes similarly to LaFeber that Cleveland and his administration were acting to protect American interests and secure their position as hegemon in the Western hemisphere.⁴

Harry J. Sievers' biography of Benjamin Harrison highlights Harrison's role as chief counsel for Venezuela as the final major undertaking of his life. Indeed, Harrison was dead within eighteen months of the day the tribunal handed down its decision. It is in Sievers' brief analysis of the arbitration period that he discusses its one-sided outcome and raises many questions about the affair as a whole.⁵ Harrison's role will be discussed at length later.

Finally, Jay Sexton provides a general account of the Monroe Doctrine, its history, and its application as part of American foreign and domestic policy. He argues that the Monroe Doctrine provides a means to explore the emergence of the American nation and empire in the nineteenth century. He asserts that the reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine to suit the crisis was a result of increasing political pressure on the administration to act in support of American interests, as well as of fears in the administration itself over a perceived increase in European colonial activity in the hemisphere.⁶

Of each of these texts, only one, Sievers, renders any judgement on the arbitration period that followed the crisis. The rest, and LaFeber and Humphreys in particular, treat the arbitration as a minor aside, despite the intrinsic link between the two moments. What follows will be a reexamination of the Venezuelan Crisis, treating the crisis and the arbitration as one ongoing event; using the personal papers and correspondence of Benjamin Harrison as well as those he produced during his time arguing for Venezuela, we will invite for reconsideration the conclusions reached more than half a century ago by a generation of historians occupied by events contemporary to themselves. Additionally, we will examine in some detail the role of the Monroe Doctrine in shaping the crisis itself and discuss its inception as an instrument of American imperialism. In so doing, we will seek to identify, understand, and ultimately rectify the problems with the existing historiography and in the process tease out details of the affair that

may not have been apparent to those who originally examined it, and, combined with our discussion of the Monroe Doctrine, reach a conclusion that furthers our understanding of Gilded Age diplomacy.

The origins of the crisis date back to around 1848, when Robert Schomburgk, a British engineer, published the results of a decade-long effort to demarcate the border between the colony of British Guiana and Venezuela. This border was very generous to the former polity and considered much of the Essequibo region to be under its, rather than Venezuela's, purview. The Essequibo region lies between the western bank of the Essequibo river and the mouth of the Orinoco river; the Orinoco is one of the largest rivers in South America and at the time was key to trade, travel, and transport in the interior of the northern part of the continent (see appendix for map).⁷ In the 1880s, gold was discovered in the region and shortly afterwards the British became much more assertive over the border.

The Venezuelan government immediately protested this new border and in response the British backpedaled, giving the impression that the line would be subject to further negotiation. And yet, the British never opened the region up to such negotiation and increasingly treated this claimed border as official. Britain continued to increase the area of its claim, up to roughly 108,000 square miles in the 1880s.⁸

Opinions are divided as to exactly why the Cleveland administration decided in 1894-5 to take up the case of Venezuela, as opposed to before, and to employ the Monroe Doctrine in doing so. LaFeber and Beisner point out that several incidents in the Caribbean as well as the British invasion of Nicaragua may have presented a growing threat to America's perceived hegemony over the Western Hemisphere.⁹ Cleveland and Secretaries of State Walter Q. Gresham and

Richard Olney may have feared that if they did not at some point attempt to flex this power, it would cease to be recognized by European powers.¹⁰

So, the task fell first to Gresham, and then picked up by Olney, to justify intervention in the dispute. Should the Schomburgk line have gone fully into force, Britain would gain full control over the mouth of the Orinoco river and therefore effective control over trade for a third of the South American continent. Such a state of affairs carried a great many unknowns for Cleveland and his administration and to allow it to come to pass would surely have been to the detriment of American trade and business interests in the region. One of Richard Olney's first tasks as Secretary of State was to draft a note to the British government, asserting that the dispute in Venezuela should be arbitrated by the United States.

The basis for Olney's justification came in the form of a new interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine. This now-legendary piece of statecraft has its origins in two passages from President James Monroe's 1823 message to Congress.¹¹ With the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812 less than a decade past and the situation in Europe far from stable, Monroe and his administration sought with these passages to articulate the need for America's national security to depend on more than just what lay at its borders. Fearing a large-scale European intervention in the ongoing Latin American Wars of Independence, the final draft of the message contained two clauses that lived on as what would eventually be known as the Monroe Doctrine. The first, what Jay Sexton calls the "noncolonization clause," states that "the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for colonization by any European powers."¹² The second, which Sexton calls the "nonintervention clause," asserts that no European powers could "extend their political system to any portion of either continent without endangering our peace and happiness."¹³

These two passages, then, are the molehill from which the mountain of the Monroe Doctrine was made in the decades to follow. Sexton goes on to point out that this declaration was purely negative and wholly inactive. It “stated what European powers could not do, but dodged the question of what the United States would do.”¹⁴ In fact, Monroe’s message did not enjoin the United States to act whatsoever should it find any European power in violation of it. This was by design. To make a direct threat against the European powers in any context was to flirt with disaster. The contest of 1812 had made abundantly clear that the United States could not hope to push back any sort of war that a more forceful and actionable declaration could have invited. Indeed, the President’s message to Congress is addressed to Congress and the people of the United States, and distinctly to no European power; the Monroe Doctrine, as originally articulated, took more the form of a vague statement of a political aim than of any foundational piece of foreign policy. It is clear, then, that the doctrine of Monroe was a product of an earlier time in the history of American empire; the United States may have aspired to the hegemon of a hemisphere-spanning international system but was fully aware that it had no power to enforce it. As fate would have it, the British, equally disinterested for their own reasons in further European intervention on the American continents, supplied just this enforcement power for most of the century.

If the Department of State had become more active in its pursuit of policy, so this must have exerted some influence on Richard Olney’s reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine. On July 20, 1895, Olney transmitted a note to the American ambassador to Britain, Thomas F. Bayard, to deliver to Prime Minister Lord Salisbury.¹⁵ The purpose of this note was to address the ongoing dispute between Britain and Venezuela and formally request that the British government submit the dispute to arbitration by the United States. After bringing the reader up to

speed on the history of the dispute, he claimed that the Monroe Doctrine necessarily obligated the United States to intervene in any affairs involving European colonial activities in the Americas. If it should allow even one such transgression, he argued, a general scramble to re-colonize South America might be invited, not dissimilar to the then-ongoing scramble for Africa. Such a state of affairs would prove a significant threat to the United States and require that it invest far more into its standing army and navy, and erode its sovereignty on the American continent.¹⁶

Unpacking Olney's note could very well be the subject of its own scholarly article, if it is not already. Olney demonstrates a very biased view of the state of both Europe and the Americas. "Europe as a whole is monarchical," he claims, ignoring that the very nation and leader he was addressing had a democratically-elected government and leader.¹⁷ The states of South America, according to him, were liberal democracies much like the United States, when in reality Venezuela was one of the only countries on the continent that was not at that moment governed by some form of military dictatorship.¹⁸ Therefore, their protection was not just a strategic imperative, but a moral imperative as well.

Walter LaFeber argues that the Monroe Doctrine was little more than a convenient tool with which Olney justified American involvement:

In essence he was interpreting the Monroe Doctrine as the catchall slogan which justified protecting what the United States considered as its own interests. If the Monroe Doctrine had not existed, Olney's note would have been written anyway, only the term American Self-Interest would have been used instead of the Monroe Doctrine.¹⁹

This claim bears some examination. On the one hand, it is certain that Olney would have made his point with or without the Monroe Doctrine. On the other hand, was this not already its intention? Whatever Monroe's 1823 speech did or did not say, its intention as a directive to provide for America's security and by extension its self-interest was more than clear. To suggest

that Olney was in any way subverting the original intention of the Doctrine with his note is to ignore its original context.

What Olney achieved, in sum, was to retrofit the original Monroe Doctrine such that instead of an inactive and negative document, it was now an active document, both negative and positive. Not only did it clearly define what European powers could not do on the American continent, it established a course of action, however vague, for America should it find a European power in violation. Britain, of course, was in violation of Olney's new doctrine, because while British Guiana was not a new colonial endeavor, its actions may be treated as such because Britain was aggressively expanding via the frontiers of an existing colony. This version of the Monroe Doctrine is today known as the "Olney Corollary."²⁰

Olney admitted himself that his words were "bumptious."²¹ Indeed, his language was so forceful that his note was nicknamed the "twenty-inch gun."²² And yet, his interpretation was far more limited than such a nickname might suggest. He wrote that it "does not establish a general protectorate by the United States over other American states," and that it "does not relieve any American state from its obligations as fixed by international law nor prevent any European power directly interested from enforcing such obligation."²³ Sexton postulates that this was a purposeful effort, to limit its utility in the future to jingoistic politicians like Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt.²⁴ But, as he concurs later, it would not be long before he lost such control over the Doctrine to these very men.²⁵

Salisbury's reply did not reach Olney for five months.²⁶ The past several years had seen a steady rise in Anglophobia among the American populace and a growth in popularity of the Monroe Doctrine even before Olney's note was finished. This trend continued through the year until his reply finally reached the State Department. As early as April, articles were being

published in the *New York Times* regarding the situation in Venezuela and the Monroe Doctrine.²⁷

In the June and November issues of *North American Review*, Henry Cabot Lodge, Joseph Wheeler, and Charles H. Grosvenor, Congressmen from Massachusetts, Alabama, and Ohio, published articles urging intervention in the crisis under the pretext of the Monroe Doctrine.²⁸

The article jointly penned by Representatives Wheeler and Grosvenor warrants closer investigation. This article contains two short essays, the first by Wheeler and the second by Grosvenor, that while divergent in their approach, emphatically agree that the United States has an obligation to intervene in the crisis and take an unwavering stand against British imperial designs. Wheeler explores the history of the Doctrine and American interventionism and concludes that the Venezuelan Crisis is an opportunity for the United States to assert once and for all its position on the world stage.²⁹ Grosvenor cares little for history and is more concerned about the current situation; the text of the Monroe Doctrine is plain, and Britain stands in violation of it.³⁰ What is not so apparent from such an article is the stark political rift that should normally exist between these two statesmen. Joseph “Fighting Joe” Wheeler, then an Alabama Democrat, is perhaps better known for his career as a general in the Confederate army and one of the Civil War’s more prolific cavalry commanders.³¹ Charles Grosvenor, an Ohio Republican, was himself commander of the 18th Ohio Infantry during the war. For these men who once stood in armed opposition to each other at Chickamauga to be able to come together and agree so emphatically on anything, let alone a major foreign policy issue, speaks volumes about how serious Americans were about the Monroe Doctrine and the crisis.

Salisbury’s reply came in early December in the form of two separate dispatches. The first refuted Olney’s interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine and its applicability to the crisis. The second dealt with the boundary crisis itself and asserted that it had little bearing on any other

nations' interests, commercial or otherwise. Humphreys, Beisner, and LaFeber have differing interpretations of Salisbury's angle. Humphreys characterizes the note as "studiously courteous," with a hint of condescension.³² Beisner calls "his arrogance a worthy match for Olney's belligerence, his manner that of a schoolmaster explaining simple ideas to small children...."³³ LaFeber several times draws attention to his sarcastic remarks.³⁴ In examining Salisbury's notes, Beisner's judgement appears an exaggeration.³⁵ Humphreys, on the other hand, is accurate in his judgement. Hardly arrogant or condescending and, rather, simply unequivocal in his statements, Salisbury directly challenges Olney's interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine and points out several inaccuracies of his note which deflate it significantly. Indeed, as LaFeber notes, throughout the notes he merely seeks to ascertain exactly which American interests are at stake in the Venezuela dispute.

Whatever the intention or tone Salisbury's missives truly embody, if they were intended to settle the matter in Washington, they did precisely the opposite. Indeed, it becomes apparent that Salisbury and the Foreign and Colonial Office staff gravely misjudged the importance of the Venezuelan question and the Monroe Doctrine, both to the Cleveland administration and the American population at large. If the *New York Times* is any indication, the affair had become unavoidable in media by the time his reply reached Olney's desk on December 7th. Several columns on the subject were authored in the days immediately following the news of the reply's arrival. None of them have any substantive commentary; the text of the note had not yet become public information, so these articles, in all likelihood, were purely conjecture.³⁶

Cleveland, in his own words, was "mad clean through" at Salisbury's reply.³⁷ Salisbury's emphatic refusal to budge on the subject of Venezuela made very real the perceived threat to American interests in the region. Because it arrived too late to be made part of Cleveland's

message to Congress on December 3rd, Olney set about drafting a special message just on the subject of the Venezuela question. Himself incensed by the message, Olney employed even more force in writing Cleveland's speech than he had in his original note to Salisbury. Delivered on the 17th, Beisner calls Cleveland's address "one of the greatest bombshells ever tossed into the halls of Congress."³⁸

In it, Cleveland vehemently refutes Salisbury's charges against the Monroe Doctrine, reaffirming both it and its application to the crisis, and reiterates the basic substance of Olney's "twenty-inch gun." He calls for the establishment of an independent commission to determine the true border between Venezuela and British Guiana, in lieu of the arbitration Britain was refusing to accede to. Additionally, he appears to make a veiled threat of war:

In making these recommendations I am fully alive to the responsibility incurred and keenly realize the consequences that may follow. I am nevertheless firm in my conviction that, while it is a grievous thing to contemplate the two great English-speaking peoples of the world as being otherwise than friendly competitors in the march of civilization, and strenuous and worthy rivals in the arts of peace, there is no calamity which a great nation can invite which equals that which follows a supine submission to wrong and injustice and the consequent loss of national self-respect and honor, beneath which are shielded and defended a people's safety and greatness.³⁹

Cleveland's message was a bombshell indeed, and according to the *New York Times* it met with immediate acceptance from Congress.⁴⁰ Humphreys also points out that, while the message owes part of its belligerence to hot tempers, it also may have been the only acceptable alternative to surrender on the matter, which Cleveland himself appears to suggest in the above quotation.

What followed Cleveland's message was, predictably, an explosion of Anglophobia and bellicosity among the general public and in Congress. The proposed commission was immediately established and funded, and the search began for members.⁴¹ Talk of war crackled throughout the country, and the *New York Times* published several articles of conjecture on the

possibility of war with Britain. Indeed, more than a few articles were published discussing the state and readiness of the Navy.⁴² The British reaction was one of shock and surprise, perhaps underlining their misunderstanding of the crisis's importance to the United States, but for the moment they had no intention of giving way. On the surface, it looked like war was looming, but this is hardly the case. War was not the intention of either government and was not taken seriously. Humphreys casts doubt on whether British public opinion would have allowed it.⁴³ Indeed, although diplomatic relations were strained, the two economies remained heavily intertwined. A war, and the subsequent cutting of ties between the two countries, would have proven catastrophic to both.

In any case, the British tune was quick to change when on January 2, 1896, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany congratulated President Paul Kruger of the Transvaal Republic on his government's successful routing of the Jameson Raid. The crisis created by this message was enough to immediately push the Venezuelan affair to the background, and as a result the British government became more open to negotiations on the subject.⁴⁴ Over the course of the following year, negotiations took place between Olney, Salisbury, and Colonial Minister Joseph Chamberlain to draw up a treaty of arbitration. This was in itself a contentious process as while Olney wanted the entirety of the territory in dispute to be up for arbitration, Salisbury and Chamberlain refused to allow already-settled territory into the question.⁴⁵ They eventually compromised on arbitrating over all territory in dispute except for that which had been settled for more than fifty years. They also agreed to establish an arbitration commission composed of two British and American representatives, one being the Chief Justice from either country, as well as a fifth arbitrator from neither country. This treaty was agreed upon in November 1896 and the final version signed in February 1897.⁴⁶

It should be made clear that the Venezuelan government was not consulted more than a handful of times over the course of this affair. Olney did not seek the approval of Venezuela before sending his note to Salisbury. No consultation was made before Cleveland's fateful message was delivered to Congress. Not even during the negotiations over how Venezuela's fate was to be decided were they consulted, except in a perfunctory manner after all was said and done.⁴⁷ No Venezuelan was to sit on either the American border commission or the arbitration tribunal. Indeed, the government only signed the treaty of arbitration under pressure from Olney.⁴⁸ American intervention in the crisis, undoubtedly, was not out of any sort of protective feelings toward a Latin American power that was being encroached on by a global empire. It was an assertion of America's sphere of influence.

Now that the arbitral court had been established and its judges determined, the parties needed lawyers to represent them. The Salisbury government employed the services of its attorney general, Sir Richard Webster, while the Venezuelan government retained the services of former President Benjamin Harrison. After leaving the presidency, Harrison had not retired. He continued to work as a lawyer and argued several cases before the Supreme Court in the intervening years between leaving the White House and his death. The work began, then, on preparing the countries' respective cases.⁴⁹

Harrison, as well as his co-counsels B. F. Tracy, former Navy Secretary; Tracy's law partner James R. Soley; and renowned international lawyer Severo Mallet-Prevost, worked frantically for over two years on the Venezuela case. Biographer Sievers describes Harrison as being on the verge of breakdown for much of this time, stressed immensely by the amount of work performed. Over the course of these two years, he and his team produced a written case in favor of Venezuela totaling over 800 pages in length. By contrast, the British case ran only fifty-

five pages.⁵⁰ Harrison later described the endeavor as the hardest two years of his life.⁵¹ Additionally, in the proceedings of the tribunal and in letters afterwards, he named this episode as the pinnacle of his legal career.⁵² Indeed, for a man who was among the first to stand in captured Atlanta and go on to hold the highest office in the country, to count this among his life's greatest achievements was not a statement without meaning.

The oral arguments for the case began in Paris on June 15, 1899.⁵³ The tribunal consisted of, as mentioned before, four high judges and one impartial expert as president. The American judges were Chief Justice Melville W. Fuller and Associate Justice David J. Brewer of the Supreme Court. The former had sworn Harrison in as president in 1889, and the latter he had appointed. The British judges were high court judges Lord Charles Russell and Lord Justice Richard Henn-Collins, and the president was Frederic F. de Martens, a Russian jurist and international law professor.⁵⁴ If the lengths of the countries' respective cases were so greatly disparate, so were the lengths of the speeches. The British legal counsel spoke for fifty-two hours in total, while Harrison spoke for just twenty-five, following other preliminary speeches by his co-counsels.

In his arguments, he likened the speeches by the British counsels to "scolding," and characterizes their fifty-five page case as "without an argument on any point of the case, law, or fact, and without the citation of a single legal authority."⁵⁵ Throughout his speech, in fact, the British counsel repeatedly attempted to bog Harrison down in semantics and argumentation over minor points.⁵⁶ Overall, Harrison's arguments resoundingly proved the Venezuelan right to the territory in question. He delivered his closing statement on September 27, 1899. In a letter to U.S. Attorney General William H. Miller that June, he had expressed concern that his closing arguments may not have the effect that it would normally have in a legal case.⁵⁷ He did not know

it yet, but he could not have predicted it more accurately. The tribunal convened on October 3 to deliver its decision: except for the mouth of the Orinoco River and a handful of other strategic points, more than nine-tenths of the territory was awarded to British Guiana.

Harrison was, predictably, incensed, although he had again predicted as much in another letter to Miller the day after delivering his conclusion: “Great Britain has taken all the territory in dispute, erected police and military stations, made mining and land grants – and it will be a terrible humiliation to have to withdraw....”⁵⁸ Later, he wrote, “Law is nothing to a British judge it seems when it is a matter of extending British dominion.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, he said in December, “the seizure and appropriation of the territories of weak nations is a practice to which all [European nations] are committed....”⁶⁰ Clearly, it seems, Harrison had much to say about the conclusion of the case, and in quite harsh terms toward Britain. Predictably, there is more to this story. The verdict delivered by the arbitration process did not appear out of thin air.

On the occasion of his death in 1948, Severo Mallet-Prevost had his own account of the arbitration process published in the *American Journal of International Law*.⁶¹ Harrison’s language towards Britain is explained when Mallet-Prevost reveals exactly what transpired after the close of the arguments. Mallet-Prevost was told by the American judges, Brewer and Fuller, that they had been approached by tribunal’s president, Frederic de Martens. Martens, apparently, desired a unanimous vote, and proposed to them a deal that would be supported by the two British judges. This deal awarded British Guiana the vast majority of the land in dispute, with the exception of the mouth of the Orinoco. Should they be inclined not to support this deal, Martens would find himself forced to vote with the two British judges and award British Guiana the whole of the territory, including the mouth of the Orinoco.⁶² Mallet-Prevost suspected that a deal had been struck between Britain and Russia, likely providing the latter with “advantages in some

other part of the globe,” as during a two-week recess the British arbitrators and Martens went back to England, and he noticed that upon their return, Lord Justice Henn-Collins, who had previously seemed interested in the case and in reaching a fair decision, now appeared uninterested.⁶³ Recognizing that they were being strong-armed, the American judges sought to consult with Venezuela’s counsel to determine the best course of action. Harrison was outraged and initially demanded that the judges author a strong dissenting opinion, but after cooling off, he realized that his foremost duty was to Venezuela and to deprive them of territory they could possibly receive, however little, would find him in the breach.⁶⁴ So it was that the decision of the tribunal was read on October 3, giving no reasoning or rationale. A small wonder indeed that in the same letter Harrison decried the motives of European nations with regards to weaker ones, he also raised strong doubts as to the efficacy and inherent fairness of tribunals like the one in Paris.⁶⁵

When properly examined together, it becomes difficult for the Venezuelan Crisis and its eventual outcome to be seen as two wholly different events, with the latter more a footnote than an important part of the discussion, yet that is precisely how it is examined by the historiography that covers it. LaFeber does not mention it a single time. Humphreys notes: “In October 1899, sitting at Paris, the Tribunal made its award. The line of boundary which it approved more or less followed the Schomburgk line... this was the least important result of the dispute.”⁶⁶ According to Beisner, “The results were anticlimactic: a Venezuelan-British treaty of arbitration in 1897 and an award from the arbitrators in 1899 that supported British claims more than Venezuelan.”⁶⁷ Only Sievers discusses the arbitration period at length and makes any suggestion that there is more to it than a single sentence. The fact is that there is a clear chain of events that links Olney’s

July 20, 1895 note and the October 3, 1899 decision, yet to all but Sievers, the affair may as well have concluded in 1897.

Looking closer, though, there may be a reason for this. These historians were not looking to illustrate the crisis in its entirety, but instead highlight an early episode of American interventionism. To them, that the United States had successfully inserted itself into the affairs of a smaller, weaker nation to enforce its ambitions on a rival great power was the whole of the affair. Beisner published originally in 1975. Humphreys' address was delivered in 1966. LaFeber published his book in 1963. Each of these pieces were published during the most significant and controversial episode of American interventionism known at the time: the Vietnam War. Indeed, it is possible, if not probable, that each of these historians were uninterested in the full picture of the affair, but instead were searching for, and to their minds found, a link in the chain of American foreign interventions that ended with Vietnam. It is telling indeed that Sievers, who published in 1968, gives the arbitration its due; he was focused on writing a biography, with motives necessarily unrelated to those of Beisner, Humphreys, or LaFeber.

If we treat this Venezuela affair as a single, ongoing event, and it is sufficiently established that we should, we must discuss how the outcome changes the picture. It has already been sufficiently recognized that Britain ultimately got what it wanted out of the affair: the resource-rich, gold-bearing Essequibo region. But as we have also seen, they only did so by rigging an international court to vote in their favor. The timing of this is also significant: just a year prior, the United States had announced victory in the Spanish-American War. By all accounts, the character of American imperialism had changed dramatically even in the time since Cleveland's message. Yet, despite this, the British still chose to enforce their own designs on Venezuela, blatantly in the face of a much stronger and more bellicose United States than the one

that had commenced the crisis and succeeded. This certainly raises questions about how American power was perceived at the turn of the twentieth century; despite the newfound strength and active nature of the United States, the British government was still willing to risk its wrath. Perhaps, though, this was a calculated decision, predicated on the fact that much had happened in the intervening years that had long since diverted American public attention from the affairs of Venezuela. This is perhaps exemplified in the fact that when the decision finally was delivered, the *New York Times* only thought it worth a short second-page article.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, the Monroe Doctrine's popularity clearly saw its inception with this affair. It would again be invoked in 1898 against Spain, and after the USS *Maine* incident, the conflagration of the Spanish-American War begun. This, however, owes part of its justification to the work of Walter Gresham, Richard Olney, and Grover Cleveland. No longer a vague statement of foreign policy intentions as dictated in 1823, the Monroe Doctrine had become an active component of American foreign policy, whose echoes could be heard for a century afterwards.

In the American popular mind, whereas "imperialism" and "colonialism" were still dirty words, practices engaged in by the decrepit, cobwebbed monarchies of Europe, the idea of enforcing the Monroe Doctrine was perceived as an act of keeping peace and order in the western hemisphere, altogether more fitting of a liberal democracy like the United States. Even such blatantly imperial activities as intervening in a colonial dispute, well beyond the borders of the United States, could be sufficiently defended if they were clothed in such language. The many articles on the Monroe Doctrine and its importance published in the *New York Times*, including an entire front-page article devoted to it, inform us that while directly asserting an empire may not have been popular, the assertion of a legal principle to the same end was acceptable.⁶⁹ Indeed, such a practice was favored heavily in Washington if the writings of

Grosvenor, Wheeler, and Lodge are to be believed. Even Grover Cleveland, who had little use for these affairs normally, was not immune.

It is worth noting that the outcome of the affair did not sit well with Venezuela. In 1962, the matter was officially reopened by the Venezuelan government, on the ostensibly correct grounds that it was not given a fair settlement in the tribunal.⁷⁰ The revived dispute has been ongoing in the decades since. As recently as November 2023, the Venezuelan government has renewed its efforts toward pressing the issue. Today, though, the bone of contention is not gold, but oil that was discovered in the past decade. Whether a confrontation of some kind is on the horizon remains to be seen.

The Venezuelan Crisis of 1895 was a turning point in American foreign policy and laid the groundwork for a century of American interventionism to come. We have seen that the current historiography of the crisis does not fully consider the affair from beginning to end, and ignores the outcome. In fact, the outcome changes the character of the crisis as a whole. The continuing flashpoint that is the Venezuela-Guyana border is concrete proof that the seemingly tired subject of Gilded Age diplomatic history has not yet lost its relevance. Even today, its consequences and repercussions continue to reveal themselves in ways that could never have been predicted by the participants, although, as Harry Sievers points out, Benjamin Harrison may not have been especially surprised.⁷¹ Such small episodes in history have ways of making themselves known at the most unlikely times, and this is why the craft of the historian remains of crucial importance.

Notes

¹ Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 242-283.

² R. A. Humphreys, "Presidential Address: Anglo-American Rivalries and the Venezuela Crisis of 1895," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 17 (1967), 131-164.

³ Robert L. Beisner, *From the Old Diplomacy to the New: 1865-1900* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson), 110.

⁴ Beisner, 109-115.

⁵ Harry J. Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison: Hoosier President* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill), 264-274.

⁶ Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), 13 and 202-211.

⁷ Today, the area claimed by Venezuela, known officially to them as "Guiana Essequiba," comprises roughly half the modern territory of the state of Guyana.

⁸ LaFeber, 243.

⁹ LaFeber, 243 and Beisner, 112.

¹⁰ Gresham died suddenly in May 1895. Olney, formerly the Massachusetts state attorney general, was appointed to replace him.

¹¹ Olney's "twenty-inch gun" note also mentions Monroe's farewell address as a source for the Doctrine but Monroe says nothing in it that was not already said in his message to Congress.

¹² Quoted in Sexton, 60.

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁵ Salisbury was acting as his own Foreign Minister at the time.

¹⁶ This paragraph and the paragraphs that follow are based on *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1895, Part I, 545-572.

¹⁷ *Foreign Relations*, 557. He clarifies that only the Republic of France is an exception.

¹⁸ Indeed, by the time the arbitration was over in 1899, Venezuela too was in the throes of revolution and governed by a military dictator.

¹⁹ LaFeber, 260.

²⁰ Sexton, 203.

²¹ Humphreys, 152.

²² Sexton, 205.

²³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 206.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 206.

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- ²⁵ Ibid., 210.
- ²⁶ Humphreys, 153.
- ²⁷ *New York Times*, April 9, 1895. Interestingly, one such article was a wholesale criticism of the Monroe Doctrine and its “unlimited” nature, as well as the “warlike opposition” for employing it.
- ²⁸ Henry Cabot Lodge, “England, Venezuela, and the Monroe Doctrine,” *The North American Review* 160, no. 463 (1895): 651–58 and Joseph Wheeler and Charles H. Grosvenor, “Our Duty in the Venezuelan Crisis,” *The North American Review* 161, no. 468 (1895): 628–33.
- ²⁹ Wheeler and Grosvenor, 631.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 633.
- ³¹ Wheeler’s military career did not end in 1865. Just three years after the Crisis, he again volunteered for the Spanish-American War and was Lt. Col. Theodore Roosevelt’s commanding officer. Wheeler served until the end of the Philippine-American War in 1900.
- ³² Humphreys, 153.
- ³³ Beisner, 111.
- ³⁴ LaFeber, 267-8
- ³⁵ The remainder of this paragraph is based on *Foreign Relations*, 563-576.
- ³⁶ *New York Times*, December 7-15, 1895.
- ³⁷ LaFeber, 267 and Beisner, 111.
- ³⁸ Beisner, 111.
- ³⁹ *Foreign Relations*, 542-545. The full text was also published in the December 18, 1895 issue of the *New York Times*.
- ⁴⁰ *New York Times*, December 18, 1895.
- ⁴¹ Humphreys, 155-6 and LaFeber, 270
- ⁴² *New York Times*, December 19-30, 1895.
- ⁴³ Humphreys, 156-7
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 156.
- ⁴⁵ A detailed account of the negotiation process is available in Joseph J. Mathews, “Informal Diplomacy in the Venezuelan Crisis of 1896,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 50, no. 2 (1963): 195-212.
- ⁴⁶ Humphreys, 157.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 158.
- ⁴⁸ Sievers, 266.
- ⁴⁹ For more on Harrison, see Sievers’ three-volume biography: *Benjamin Harrison: Hoosier Warrior*, *Hoosier Statesman*, and the volume used here, *Hoosier President*. Harrison’s presidency has received some scholarly attention in more recent years, but no significant work has focused on his ex-presidency.
- ⁵⁰ Sievers, 268.
- ⁵¹ Benjamin Harrison to Francis B. Loomis, December 22, 1899.
- ⁵² Benjamin Harrison Papers, Series 13: Venezuela Boundary Dispute, 1899; Part 2.
- ⁵³ Sievers, 270.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 270-271.
- ⁵⁵ Benjamin Harrison Papers, Series 13: Venezuela Boundary Dispute, 1899; Part 2.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Harrison to William H. H. Miller, June 23, 1899.
- ⁵⁸ Harrison to Miller, September 28, 1899.
- ⁵⁹ Harrison to Miller, October 7, 1899.

⁶⁰ Harrison to William E. Dodge, December 12, 1899.

⁶¹ Otto Schoenrich, "The Venezuela-British Guiana Boundary Dispute," *The American Journal of International Law* 43, no. 3 (1949): 523–30.

⁶² Schoenrich, 529-530.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 530.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 530.

⁶⁵ Harrison to Dodge, December 12, 1899.

⁶⁶ Humphreys, 162.

⁶⁷ Beisner, 112.

⁶⁸ *New York Times*, October 4, 1899.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, January 2, 1896.

⁷⁰ Jacqueline Anne Braveboy-Wagner, *The Venezuela-Guyana Border Dispute: Britain's Colonial Legacy in Latin America* (Boulder: Westview, 1984), 25.

⁷¹ Sievers, 273-4.

Collin:

This reads well. I think you need to play up that it has some meaning for Midwestern history. Not a lot, but point out that three of the actors in this saga (Harrison, Gresham, and Grosvenor) were Midwesterners, and the former two Hoosiers. It will be a bit forced, but you can do this on page 2, in your first main ¶, in the part that starts "The Venezuelan Crisis of 1895 was a major turning point." Note that I fixed your page numbers so that the cover page isn't counted as one of your pages, so that has you more clearly in the page limits to readers who might be doing something superficial like that at the outset.

I would think that the endnotes should go before the bibliography. I would still keep the sources in your bibliography separated primary and secondary. I think you can just have *North American Review* without the author, but if you want to keep Wheeler as the first author, list it as the last of your items in the primary, and try to stay in alphabetical order.

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