

## International politics

**Neils Eichhorn** reviews the impact of events outside the UK, particularly in the US, on Liberal governments in the second half of the nineteenth century.

# William Ewart Gladstone, the Liberal Party, and the Impact of North American Politics and War, 1855–1885



ON 27 NOVEMBER 1879, William Ewart Gladstone spoke at West Calder on the future of the country and its relationship with the United States. He lauded how much the United States had grown and prospered since its founding over a century earlier. He observed, ‘The development which the Republic has effected has been unexampled in its rapidity and force. . . . But while we have been advancing with this portentous rapidity, America is passing us by as if in a canter.’ Gladstone was sure that it was just a question of time before the ‘daughter’ former colony would surpass ‘mother’ Britain, the former colonial metropolis of the United States.<sup>1</sup> Yet this was the same man who seventeen years earlier had expected the imminent demise of that same republic in his controversial Newcastle speech.<sup>2</sup>

As the central figure of the Liberal Party in this period, Gladstone sheds light on the various challenges faced by the party as it defined its politics in the light of the multitude of domestic and international challenges.<sup>3</sup> However, neither the Civil War nor political changes in the United States figured much in those political conversations. Obviously, much happened during those thirty years, but it is the author’s hope that selected glimpses of the changes and continuities will illustrate the limited impact of North American events on British liberal thinking. It may seem odd to suggest in an article about the American Civil War’s impact on the Liberal Party that such an impact was marginal, but we need to avoid narrowly focused overstatements in order to understand the full picture faced by British policy makers. This work is a challenge to Anglophilic and US exceptionalist thinking by

The Coalition Ministry, 1854, by Sir John Gilbert (© National Portrait Gallery, London). Aberdeen’s cabinet decides on the expedition to the Crimea; Palmerston, on the right, points at the town of Balaklava on a map held open by the Duke of Newcastle. Gladstone is seated on the left, holding a letter on his knee.

decentring the United States from the narrative and pointing out the complexities faced by Liberal policy makers in parliament, particularly Gladstone.

This article is not about the American Civil War<sup>4</sup> or more accurately the Civil War era (c.1850 to c.1880) and its impact on British Liberal policy makers. The interested reader will find an abundance of works of varying quality on that subject.<sup>5</sup> From among the numerous issues and problems both domestic and international faced by Britain during this period, I focus on just four topic areas: the impact of the Crimean War, the debates over electoral reform, the Irish Question, and the settling of the *Alabama* claims. While each theme will generally start with the end of the war in North America, it will frequently move back in time for context.

First elected to parliament in 1832, Gladstone’s first ministerial appointment was in Peel’s cabinet in 1843. In 1852, Lord Aberdeen called on him to be chancellor of the exchequer, as did Palmerston in 1859 when the Liberal Party came into being but remained a loose coalition of different interests, requiring a delicate balancing act. On 3 December 1868, Gladstone became prime minister in his own right and served three more times, dominating British Liberal politics for much of the remainder of the century.

In 1868, Gladstone and his party faced a complicated domestic and international situation. This included the continuing rivalry with Russia and the tsarist government’s growing attempts to revise the Crimean War’s peace treaty terms; the complicated legacies of the rebel shipbuilding program during the American Civil War in North America; the perennial Irish question; and continued domestic demands for an enlargement of the electoral franchise. These were certainly not the only issues faced by Gladstone’s first ministry, but I will use them to consider the impact of the American Civil War on the Liberal Party, suggesting a limited impact of the United States on British thinking. As the party faced all

these crises, the American Civil War was rarely discussed and hardly influenced British policy makers.<sup>6</sup>

### The impact of the Crimean War

The Crimean War (1853–1856) was a watershed in European history as well as in British politics. The British government had ill-advisedly entered the conflict under pressure from belligerent-minded members of the cabinet such as Palmerston, after Russia and the Ottoman Empire had already been at war for a few months. For many Russophobes in Britain, the aim was to contain Russian power and reduce the threat that the tsarist empire posed to British imperial interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. For Palmerston, this was also a conflict between modern, liberal, representative systems of government and the autocratic conservatism of the tsar. The outcome of the war, a territorial return to the status quo antebellum and the closing of the Bosphorus to Russian naval assets, was hardly satisfactory considering the cost, human, material and financial, for the powers involved.<sup>7</sup>

British historians have not yet grappled with what I will call ‘Crimean War Syndrome’. There is not yet an answer as to why Palmerston so dramatically changed his attitude after the Crimean War. He is often considered a loose cannon and belligerent politician in the lead-up to the Crimean War, and

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not just Russia felt his wrath in that regard. However, he became much more reluctant to get involved in international entanglements after the Crimean War, including in the American Civil War and the unification struggles in Europe.<sup>8</sup> While Great Britain certainly engaged in much sabre rattling during

the Italian and German unification wars, there was more bluff and bluster than an actual desire to engage militarily. Britain withdrew into isolation, reluctant to engage in international adventures and altering the balance of power; and the shadow of the Crimean War, or Crimean War Syndrome, lingered into the Gladstone ministries.<sup>9</sup> To understand the impact of the American Civil War on British thinking, the long-term effect of the Crimean War should be kept in mind. At the same time, as I have suggested elsewhere, British politicians always kept a close eye on Russia’s expansionist tendencies.<sup>10</sup>

Gladstone himself was deeply aware of the fundamental impact that the Crimean War had had on Britain and its allies. He pointed to the Ottoman Empire’s massive accumulation of debt after the war. He appreciated that some of the debt helped to fund a new ironclad fleet, but British investors did not benefit from the new debt. Even more, Gladstone understood that the Crimean War had become less popular as the lack of tangible results became apparent. The leaders of the parliamentary opposition to the war, John Bright and Richard Cobden, gained support as they had been willing to stand up against the initially popular conflict.<sup>11</sup> Parliamentary debates on the lessons the country should learn from the Crimean War were much more frequent than any on the American Civil War.

During the Crimean War, the British war effort was hamstrung by bureaucratic problems. When the Aberdeen government entered the war, the cabinet contained the secretary of state for war and the colonies. In 1854, the government divided the department, with separate secretaries of state for war and for the colonies. On 15 February 1870, Gladstone’s war secretary, Edward, Viscount Cardwell, rose in the House of Commons to propose a new War Office bill. He reminded his fellow MPs of the disorganised state of the army at the

time of the Crimean War, which had brought about the creation of his office.<sup>12</sup> He used the memory of the Crimean War to continue to improve the efficiency of the British military.

The Cardwell Reforms came after the American Civil War and in the course of the Franco-German War of 1870/71; however, its inspirations were much older. The rebellion in North America only surfaced with regard to the need for Canadian defences during the *Trent* affair. The experiences of the British Army during the Crimean War and the 1857 Indian Rebellion, which had stretched the military resources of the empire to their limits, brought changes that saw the British Army withdraw from the settler colonies and return much of the fighting force to Great Britain itself. Here, a two-battalion regimental system gave each unit a specific base and recruiting ground, allowing one of the battalions to serve in the empire, and create closer ties between community and unit. Furthermore, the new enemies were perceived to be in Central Europe, with Chesney's 1871 novella, *The Battle of Dorking*, suggesting the hypothetical scenario of a German invasion of Great Britain.<sup>13</sup> The American Civil War had little impact on the reforms.

The war between France and the unifying German states raised new dilemmas for the Liberal Party and Gladstone. Among them was the accusation that the government had learned the wrong lessons from the Crimean War. On 1 August 1870, Benjamin Disraeli rose to address the Franco-German War, pointing out that the House had frequently during past and recent European conflicts remained silent and, in his opinion, that had caused much damage. With brutal honesty he said, 'They have thought that by silence they were aiding the Government, and it has generally happened that by that silence they have embarrassed it, so that when the Parliament and the Ministry have separated this has often occurred.' Disraeli reminded the House that Britain was a signatory power to the treaty that had created Belgium and protected the state's neutrality within Europe, a neutrality threatened by the

war between France and the German states.<sup>14</sup> While he did not draw an explicit parallel, one can easily see that reluctance stemming from the Crimean War influenced British inaction.

Furthermore, Disraeli implied that the Gladstone ministry should take meaningful action:

I hope, therefore, there will be between Her Majesty's Government and Russia not a mere general exchange of platitudes as to the advantages of restoring peace and averting the horrors of war, but something more. I hope they will confer together as two great Powers who have entered into the same engagements, and as two Powers who themselves may be forced to take the part of belligerents.

While the Conservative leader agreed with the declaration of neutrality, he desired that it be an armed neutrality to better protect British interests. Even more, he considered it important for Britain to act more forcefully and with the military ability to back its position.<sup>15</sup> While Liberal governments had bluffed the international community with British projections of power in the past decades, that was not working anymore and Disraeli demanded teeth to go with the British roar.

Gladstone responded for the government. He questioned the accuracy of Disraeli's history lesson and claimed that the British government had unsuccessfully assumed in the present situation the role of 'mediator'. As Disraeli had raised the option of cooperation with Russia, Gladstone noted that there was no ill-feeling between the two countries preventing such a cooperation. However, the shadow of the Crimean War and its changes to the European balance of power lingered. Gladstone opposed the notion of armed neutrality. He reminded Disraeli that being a neutral included duties Britain had to take very seriously. He stated, 'We had that misfortune in the case of the great conflict which devastated the Continent of North America.' At the

same time, Gladstone corrected the view of the Crimean War voiced by Disraeli.<sup>16</sup> While the recent events in North America influenced the conversation of how Great Britain should react to the continental conflict, the Crimean War legacy was at least as powerful. For British policy makers, continental European affairs always took precedent over what happened in the rest of the world.

Despite Gladstone's claim to the contrary, concerns remained whether Britain under Liberal leadership had abdicated its role and influence in Europe. As parliament debated the peace between France and the German states, members wondered if Great Britain's influence in Europe had declined. Gladstone expressed little worry:

Do let us bear in mind that England is not Europe, and England is not neutral Europe ... I sometimes hear hon. Gentlemen express sentiments to the effect that we have lost our influence in Europe, and that nobody regards us. I think England has no reason to be dissatisfied with the position she occupies in regard to European affairs. The anxiety of other Powers to enter into the consideration of our views, to obtain an expression of them, and to obtain our co-operation – if this were a matter of national vanity, is as much as we ought to desire; and we must be careful we do not strain the opportunities of our position.<sup>17</sup>

Despite Britain's frequent meddling and engagement in European affairs, Gladstone seemed to indicate that the future lay not with Europe, at least not as the old-style powerbroker of yesterdays. With possible echoes of modern days, Britain did not desire to be chained down by European entanglements but have all the freedom of action that its global economic and territorial imperial interests required.

Increasingly, British attention was not on the final stages of the wars of German unification; there was growing concern about Russian revisionism of the 1856 Treaty of Paris

which had ended the Crimean War. Russia challenged the treaty stipulation that had demilitarised the Black Sea.<sup>18</sup> The lingering shadow of the Crimean War remained as War-rington's Liberal MP, Peter Rylands, rose to remind the members that the Crimean War was increasingly viewed as a mistake by Britons, especially as 'the Treaty did not compensate for the sacrifices of the war in which we were involved.' Even more, Rylands assumed the war was preventable and that it was the combination of public opinion and the press whipping the country into a spirit of war, encouraged by the accusations levelled by Russell and Palmerston, against Russia.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of an international conference to settle the outstanding issues with Russia did not have significant support even within the Liberal Party. For example, Reading MP Sir Francis Henry Goldsmid worried that such an international conference, especially while France was still engaged in war, was not a wise policy. Even more, such a conference was likely 'to give up all we had fought for in the Crimean War – namely, the neutralisation of the Black Sea; and Russia, as usual, gained her end.' Finally, Goldsmid queried whether, if Russia was permitted to abrogate the treaty of 1856, what prevented the tsarist government from abrogating the newest treaty in a few years?<sup>20</sup>

The party was divided on how to best approach international relations and in many ways, the Crimean War continued to hang over the Liberal Party's ideological conversations and divide its members on foreign policies regarding Russia. It is important to note how much Russia loomed over these conversations and how little North American contributed to them. As much as they did not wish to be part of Europe, they were part of Europe and European affairs were of far greater importance.

### Electoral reform

If the party could not agree on a coherent foreign policy, discussions about domestic

reforms, particularly electoral reforms, were not much easier. The British certainly looked to other countries and history for examples in how to craft a stable political entity and make adjustments, including justifying the expansion of the electoral franchise. This had been an ongoing conversation in the country since the First Reform Act in the 1830s. The Chartist movement had reinvigorated calls for democratic reforms and parliament debated an enlargement of the electoral franchise during the 1850s. As those parliamentary debates went nowhere, the issue reappeared in the late 1860s and early 1870s.

The reform debates in the 1850s and 1860s are well known to British scholars of the era, but historians in the United States continue to operate under an exceptionalist perception that the victory of the United States in 1865 safeguarded republicanism for the world. As a recent scholar terms it, ‘Were southern secession to succeed, slavery would be preserved, the republican experiment discredited.’<sup>21</sup> Illustrating the complete lack of understanding for the complex and long-ongoing British conversation about electoral reform is James McPherson’s statement, ‘It is probably no exaggeration to say that if the North had lost the war, thereby confirming Tory opinions of democ-

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racy and confounding the liberals, the Reform Bill would have been delayed for years.’<sup>22</sup> However, as recent, less Anglophilic and less US-exceptionalist scholarship has shown, the British were well aware of the problematic US electoral system and did not view the United States as the last best hope on earth for democracy.

In the process of justifying any type of political reform, British political leaders looked abroad for inspiration and warnings. The greatest worry was that a political reform

could result in instability. Among others, Britons looked to Greece, often seen as the ‘cradle of democracy’. They were amazed at how far the country had fallen – a powerful reminder of the instability of democratic societies. Events like the Don Pacifico Affair in the 1850s had highlighted to the British public and political leadership the instability of modern Greece.<sup>23</sup> The United States was no different, as the British had often looked with concern at the former colony.<sup>24</sup>

Importantly, Gladstone and members of the Liberal Party knew that they were part of a loose coalition. After all, the proto-Liberal Party during the 1850s and into the 1860s consisted of Whigs, Peelites and Radicals, each with their own agendas. Even if there was a new name, the individuals in the Liberal cabinet retained these old identities. The party was under Gladstone’s sway, but people had the perception that ‘Gladstone might have been a dangerous man to have as a friend, but he might be even more dangerous to have as an enemy.’ In many ways Gladstone gave the party a unifier around whom the various interests could collect.<sup>25</sup> However, this was not always the case as the electoral reform debates illustrate.

As I showed elsewhere, in the course of the 1850s, when parliament debated electoral reform, which happened on four occasions, the United States usually served as an example to avoid. Well aware of how elections, and especially election day, worked there, British political leaders perceived democratic elections as a direct route to anarchy and chaos. Election fraud and mobs only added to the perception that democracy created instability, something the British desired to avoid.<sup>26</sup> The war in North America did not lessen the perception of democratic instability and the US version as an example to avoid.

Although the leading voice of the Liberal Party, Gladstone was reluctant on the issue,

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worrying about the ‘whims of unfettered democracy’. Throughout his political career, he ‘remained social conservative and an unenthusiastic democrat, anxious to preserve the roles of a hereditary monarchy and aristocracy, to reaffirm the legitimacy of the State and Church, and to preserve a hierarchical social order.’<sup>27</sup>

However, even after the passage of the Second Reform Act of 1867, the demands to further enlarge the electoral franchise persisted. Expansion was only one issue; election security was another. In 1870, the Liberal MP for Huddersfield, Edward Leatham, proposed the adoption of a secret ballot to protect voters against the whims of their employers, landlords and others in power. In the second reading, he justified the bill’s necessity based on coercion that had taken place and how that impacted electoral outcomes.<sup>28</sup>

As so often, international examples provided inspiration for MPs. The member for Huddersfield pointed to Australia, where the colonial authorities had already instituted a secret ballot to protect against coercion. There was hope that such a process would undercut the potential for violence at the election, which Leatham had to admit British elections were

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not immune from either, as mob intimidation and disruption had historically occurred. He observed, ‘At Gravesend a mob – I regret to say calling themselves Liberals – took possession of the town at noon on the polling day, smashed the windows of all known Conservatives, and, if the evidence is to be believed, so intimidated voters that they turned the election.’ And this was not the only example.<sup>29</sup>

While semi-democratic elections had been the norm in the United States for decades, the ballot was delivered by the parties and cast

in open fashion, opening the process to corruption on many different levels. Therefore, Leatham did not point to the former British colonies in North America, but the loyal one in the southern hemisphere for an example of good elections. He noted:

the Australian Ballot proposed by this Bill is a simple, easy, and expeditious mode of taking the poll; that while riot and disorder prevailed at Australian elections before its introduction, since its introduction they have been conducted with perfect order; that whereas intimidation, bribery, and treating prevailed to a greater or less extent, intimidation has absolutely ceased, and bribery and treating, where they existed, have been reduced to a minimum.<sup>30</sup>

Australia was an example of a functioning democratic system of government that British Liberals could learn from. Placing this imperial possession with a much shorter experience with democratic government ahead of the United States illustrates further that the latter was not omnipresent to the British mind when it came to political reforms.

Finally, Leatham pointed to European liberals as universally calling for the secret ballot and even hinted at the continuation of manhood suffrage in France during the reign of Napoleon III. Leatham claimed:

Imperfect though the French Ballot may be, it has been found complete enough to baffle one of the most powerful despotisms which the world has ever known. It is the Ballot which is raising the French nation out of the political degradation in which they have been plunged.<sup>31</sup>

Despite what some US historians like to see in Napoleon III’s France, this British Liberal

did not view the country solely in a negative light, the continuation of democratic elections being a beacon in the dark days of Napoleon's regime.

Finally, Leatham turned to the United States and reminded his fellow members of the committee hearing during which the opponents of the ballot produced the example of South Carolina during slavery. The witness gave a reasonable presentation of the issues of bribery in the state, showcasing the state and system's backwardness. Leatham offered a different assessment of the electoral system in the United States:

There is bribery in New York, in Pennsylvania, and at Boston. Now, why is this? Because the American Ballot, although perhaps complete enough to meet any ordinary exigency, is not complete enough to ensure purity among a population saturated with the corrupt ideas which they bring with them from Europe. In the few American constituencies which are corrupt, the voting tickets are purposely made distinct in colour and device, in order that the briber may watch the bribed vote given.<sup>32</sup>

As this was a debate about the secret ballot, the United States again served as an example of how to avoid the chaos associated with democracy.

The government response came from the Marquess of Hartington, the Postmaster General, who pointed out that Leatham's proposal had put the government in an awkward position. The government preferred to follow the Queen's Speech's suggestion and appoint a committee to look into electoral reform, which could include the secret ballot.<sup>33</sup> The Conservative member for Chester, Henry Cecil Raikes, pointed to a problematic reality for the supporters of the secret ballot, which was that such a voting system did not exist in the United States or France. Instead, the main example proponents could bring forward

was Australia, a small colonial society.<sup>34</sup> The United States and its recent rebellion did not contribute much to this conversation within the Liberal Party or the country as a whole, which was still divided on electoral reform.

Despite the secret ballot debate, the enlargement of the franchise remained a topic into the 1880s. As so often in the past, questions about democracy and how trustworthy the voter was arose immediately. The Ipswich MP, Jesse Collings, pointed to how the United States had granted African Americans the right to vote so they could learn how to exercise it in an intelligent way. Collings argued that, 'There was abundant evidence that our rural population would know how to use the vote. At many meetings which he had attended they had exhibited marvellous political instinct and intelligence.'<sup>35</sup>

However, not everybody in the Liberal Party agreed with the assessment for more reforms. The Montrose MP, William Baxter, argued that it was not necessary for Great Britain to imitate all the political changes made by the Australian colony or the United States. After all, Baxter argued, 'Some of our ancient franchises are difficult to defend; but they have come down from an olden period, and are cherished by large classes of the people of this country.' At the same time, he did not deny the need for reforms. He worried about the ignorance of people exercising the right to vote and the need for education laws to have an effect in that regard. He was not in favour of the idea of universal manhood suffrage. 'Theoretically, there are people who believe that manhood suffrage is the correct principle. I am not here to deny that after this generation, and probably another, have passed away it may possibly be safe.' Despite having some qualms about the redistribution of districts, Baxter believed strongly, 'history has taught us, in trumpet tones, in all time that Commonwealths are not endangered by trusting the people, but by withholding from them rights.'<sup>36</sup> The omnipresent fear of revolution in British politics and the desire to avoid a situation similar to



France dominated Liberal conversations, not the events or impact of the recent rebellion in North America. Even after seventy years, the French Revolution and its more recent imitators cast a long shadow over British politics.

However, by 1880, the British needed little reminding that the US democratic system was flawed. Reconstruction offered additional examples of how corrupt and fraudulent those elections were. The 1876 presidential election was an utter disaster with both parties in Louisiana doing everything to win, including pre-election intimidation, vote manipulation and outright election theft. If the election was not bad enough, the later investigation of the election fraud uncovered in even greater detail how widespread and high up the fraud went.<sup>37</sup>

The *Pall Mall Gazette*, which had only recently changed editorial outlook to the Liberal Party, published a devastating indictment of the US electoral system in September 1880. While the paper dismissed some of the accusations about voter intimidation and racist violence, the evidence that fraud, vote manipulation and the outright rigging of the election had taken place were clear. The paper observed:

Thus there is the most singular toleration of acknowledged foul play by both the players; and this is all the more noteworthy because communities and Governments, far less scrupulous on the whole, have proved extremely intolerant of electoral fraud. If ever there was a Government which might be supposed capable of it, it was that of the Second French Empire. The Ministers and prefects of Napoleon III did not indeed neglect some American precedents; to use the American phrase, they often 'gerrymandered' the constituencies by grouping them so as to produce a favourable result; but they never ventured to tamper with the ballot-box.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, even, in US scholarship, the often-vilified Emperor Napoleon III did not

engage in activities perpetrated by US politicians and especially those in Louisiana in 1876, with outright manipulation of the vote. How could the United States be an example for democratic elections if it did not respect the voice of the voters? The Liberal Party was well aware of this situation and cautious using the United States as an example when calling for electoral reform.

### Irish home rule

The third issue whereby the American Civil War often reared its ugly face in British politics and may have shaped Liberal policy is the Irish Question. Tens of thousands of Irishmen fought in the US army, and some of the Irish nationalist leaders viewed the war as a training opportunity for a future independence war in Ireland. They could also use outstanding issues between Great Britain and the United States for their nationalist campaign. While, in 1848, a small group of revolutionaries had unsuccessfully tried to end British rule, the Irish had regrouped in 1858 as the Irish Republican Brotherhood under the leadership of James Stephens. Their desire to bring about Irish independence was manifested in attempts to stage an uprising in Ireland, terrorism in Great Britain, and a conflict between Great Britain and the United States along the Canadian border.<sup>39</sup> In the light of these events, Gladstone started to contemplate appeasement of the Irish by embracing home rule.<sup>40</sup>

For once, the events in North America had an impact on thinking in Great Britain and the Liberal Party. The leadership of the Irish Republican Brotherhood was largely in exile in France and some in the United States. Their ambition for Irish independence had not declined. The Civil War had seen a large number of Irish migrants take up arms in defence of the United States, training that could be useful during another revolution. The violent campaign of the IRB in Europe and Fenians in North America meant that Gladstone had to deal with the Irish situation, which he tried

to settle by inching the country toward home rule, a position unpopular even in his own party.<sup>41</sup>

The initial conversation in the government was about giving the Irish some concessions to undermine the Irish Republican Brotherhood. As a result, parliament passed the Irish Church Act of 1869 which separated the Church of England and Ireland and disestablished the latter. Gladstone's ability to pass the

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act and his desire to make changes to Irish policy was part of the new thinking in the party. Not a Whig nor a Radical Liberal, neither was his economic liberalism that of the Manchester School. Lord Granville characterised him as part of the Oxford Movement: 'Mr. Gladstone was, it was noted, Scotch by origin, Welsh by residence, and Catholic by sympathy.'<sup>42</sup> However, the political leadership in the United States and London had no desire to let the domestic Irish issue escalate into a conflict between the two countries.

The Fenians were largely a nuisance. On 23 February 1866, Sir Edward Watkin, the Liberal MP for Stockport, asked what the government had done about the Fenian Raids and whether the government had talked with the US government about the situation. Gladstone responded for the government by pointing back to the recent statement by the home secretary that 'the Fenian conspiracy was of American and not of Irish origin, and that it was not countenanced by the Government of the United States.' Furthermore, Gladstone defended the actions of the governments in London and Washington in the matter. He observed, 'The mere general remonstrance which my hon. Friend recommends, the mere complaint to the United States Government of what is going on in America, the mere setting forth of the inconvenience which arises to us

from those lawless proceedings – for such they are – of certain American subjects, would have diminished the dignity of this country.' Why should the British government make a fool of itself arguing over a movement universally disliked. Gladstone urged his fellow members to be cautious and look to the nuances with regard to the Fenian movement.<sup>43</sup>

While Watkin was satisfied with Gladstone's answer, the Liberal member for Chatham, Sir Andrew Otway, wondered if the House should let Gladstone and the government off so easily after admitting no demonstration had taken place in

Washington. He pointed to the Crimean War and wondered if the war would have taken place if the Commons had made the British views more clearly known to the Russian. Otway grilled Gladstone on how it was possible the government had no information about Fenian activities – what was the minister in Washington doing?<sup>44</sup> The question session illustrated the rift even within the Liberal Party over the Irish Question.

In Birmingham, on 7 November 1888, Gladstone spoke about the Irish Question and the issues of home rule. In view of the nationalist age that had seen the creation of many nation-states but also left many unfulfilled dreams, Gladstone noted that 'the Irish cannot and the Irish ought not, to acquiesce in a Government which is against them, a Government of unequal laws.' While Gladstone elaborated on the many British policies where the Irish people had suffered, he was cautious not to suggest outright Irish independence or even home rule, to which he was sympathetic. At the same time, Gladstone implicitly worried that if a conflict with, say, the United States emerged, the Irish would not be loyal to the mother country and be a liability.<sup>45</sup> His policies were thus not just based around sympathy for the Irish.

The Liberal Party was not unanimously behind Gladstone on the idea of home rule.

When he introduced a specific policy proposal in 1886 during his third premiership, the party split apart, losing its majority in the House of Commons. As a result, after only months in office, Gladstone's third ministry collapsed on 20 July 1886.

In the final debate on the subject, George Goschen, Liberal MP for Edinburgh East, who eventually turned against Gladstone, wondered why it was necessary to change the relationship between Ireland and the rest of the kingdom, which made not much sense. He looked to Austria and Hungary as an example. Gladstone briefly interjected that he did not think that there was only a partial union, but it is unclear if he meant the Habsburg or British. In contrast, he looked to the other parts of the British Dominion, when he explained:

There is no doubt a practical question, because it is quite true that in constituting a Legislature in Ireland we do what we did when we constituted a Legislature for Canada and for Australia. We devolve an important portion of power – we did it in Canada, and I hope we shall do it in Ireland – and we devolve it with a view to not a partial, not a nominal, but a real and practical independent management of their own affairs.

At the same time, Gladstone pointed to international examples to illustrate that independence was usually the result of a foreign intervention, like that of France during the rebellion of the Thirteen Colonies. While the United States appeared in the debates as a safe haven for Irish refugees and a base for Irish national ambitions, there was no reference to the recent rebellion.<sup>46</sup>

Historian Theodore Koditschek asked the important question that even members of parliament had wondered about regarding the Irish diaspora community in the United States. 'Would the United States become the staging ground for a new Irish revolt, much as Spain and France had been in earlier centuries?'<sup>47</sup> The

growing international tensions and rivalries made the possibility that one of Britain's rivals might come to the aid of the Irish a distinct possibility and, in light of the isolation Britain had entered within European politics, it was not far-fetched. However, while one might see a parallel between the rebellion in North America and Ireland, some members of the Liberal Party viewed the country as a united whole that could not be separated with home rule.

### **Alabama claims**

Finally, Gladstone was lucky that during his first ministry he put to rest one of the remaining issues between Great Britain and the United States from the 1860s, the settlement of the so-called *Alabama* claims.<sup>48</sup> There was much disagreement over whether the British government should accept any responsibility for the actions done by the Confederate raider *Alabama*, based on the accusation from US political figures that the British had allowed the ship to depart and implicitly supported the rebellion. However, Gladstone pushed for it and asked his chancellor of the exchequer to pay the settlement of \$15 million. He did not view it as an admission of guilt but as an investment in the future. As Boyd Hilton notes, 'For Gladstone the important point was to establish 'a good prospective system [of] rules for international law in the future.'<sup>49</sup>

The *Alabama* claims raised an odd situation from the British perspective. The earl of Redesdale put it rather pointedly in the House of Lords: 'We have the anomalous state of things that Virginia and the other Southern States are asking us to give them an indemnity for the injury committed by themselves.' The earl of Lauderdale, a former naval officer, added that the British would not have made claims against the United States if Russia had built *Alabamas* in the United States during the Crimean War. Foreign Secretary Lord Granville corrected his colleagues in the Lords that the British had never recognised

the Confederacy's independence, just its belligerency. He could not comment further on the treaty since he felt the commissioners had done the best they could under the circumstances.<sup>50</sup>

The British soon discovered when the arbitration tribunal sat down in Geneva that the vagueness of the treaty text was hurting them. They had left the claims over the *Alabama* vague so that the treaty would win ratification. However, the negotiation team had assumed that any offering by the United States of the indirect claims would immediately be rejected by the tribunal. Members of Gladstone's cabinet, even Lord Goschen, were not in favour of the indirect claims being allowed at the tribunal. He even threatened to resign from the cabinet, placing it in grave danger. Gladstone defused the situation by observing that he too opposed the indirect claims made by the United States. At the same time, this was not a matter before the cabinet but before the arbitration tribunal.<sup>51</sup>

At the end we have to be cautious with Gladstone's unique set of views. Despite his Newcastle speech having assumed the imminent end of the United States in 1862, within fifteen years, Gladstone had changed his tune and assumed that the country 'rendered a splendid service to the general cause of popular government throughout

the world.' At the same time, Gladstone was impressed how Britain had peacefully freed the slaves, but the island communities remained economically desolate and peace out of reach, whereas the United States freed its slaves in bloody civil war without the economy suffering and peace and order remaining in place.<sup>52</sup> Gladstone either was wilfully ignorant or intentionally misleading in this statement as Reconstruction was hardly peaceful. The new generation of Liberals, some of whom were US-philes, like modern historians, took a far less objective view on the United States.

It needs to be remembered that even this concluding episode of the rebellion was overshadowed by international events surrounding the war between France and the German states and associated rebellion in Paris, the uprising in Cuba, the ever-present Eastern Question and rivalry with Russia as it made its way into Central Asia. It is too easy to assume that Liberal Party members looked to the recent rebellion in North America when making policy decisions. They, like the political leaders of the country, had to take into consideration a multitude of international issues and frequently the United States was the example to avoid, as with democracy.

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- 1 Quoted in *Thoughts from the Writings and Speeches of William Ewart Gladstone*, ed. George Barnett Smith (Frederick A. Stokes Co, 1895), pp. 214–15.
- 2 *The Observer*, 12 Oct. 1862; Niels Eichhorn, 'The Intervention Crisis of 1862: A British Diplomatic Dilemma?', *American Nineteenth Century History*, 15 (Nov. 2014), pp. 287–310.
- 3 See John Breuilly, *Labour and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Essays in Comparative History* (Manchester University Press, 1992); Duncan A. Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War* (Royal Historical Society/Boydell Press, 2003); Murney Gerlach, *British Liberalism and the United States: Political and Social Thought in the Late Victorian Age* (Palgrave, 2001); Brent E. Kinser, *The American Civil War in the Shaping of British Democracy* (Ashgate, 2011); Dieter Langewiesche, *Liberalism in Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2000); Simon Morgan and Anthony Howe, *Rethinking Nineteenth-Century Liberalism: Richard Cobden*

- Bicentenary Essays* (Routledge, 2016). These works show that the Civil War had an impact on some Liberal Party members in Great Britain but alongside other influences such as Italy and its Risorgimento. There is no clear pattern of British- or US-based scholars taking a different perspective, as scholars based on both sides of the Atlantic tend to overemphasise US influences.
- 4 An arguably better term for the conflict is ‘the War of the Rebellion’; however, the term ‘the American Civil War’ is used here in consideration of its readership. See Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars 1830–1910* (Viking, 2016).
  - 5 See Hugh Dubrulle, *Ambivalent Nation: How Britain Imagined the American Civil War* (Louisiana State University Press, 2018); Peter O’Connor, *American Sectionalism in the British Mind 1832–1863* (Louisiana State University Press, 2018).
  - 6 Scholarship bears this out. There are also few mentions of the United States in general, aside from the Fenians and the Alabama Claims. See Jonathan P. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (Yale University Press, 1993).
  - 7 See Orlando Figes, *The Crimean War: A History* (Metropolitan Books, 2010), p. 432. Paul W. Schroeder, in *Austria, Great Britain and the Crimean War: The Destruction of the European Concert* (Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 417–19, 421–2, argues that British efforts to craft a new Europe and its lack of commitment to the new European order gave rise to the unification movements and created chaos instead of progress.
  - 8 The most recent Palmerston biographer David Brown – *Palmerston: A Biography* (Yale University Press, 2010) – argues that Palmerston was keenly aware of the power of public opinion but that the goal of the Palmerston government was to promote liberal policies and institutions aboard, which put Britain in conflict with the Russian empire.
  - 9 David F. Krein, in *The Last Palmerston Government: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and the Genesis of ‘Splendid Isolation’* (Iowa State University Press, 1978), argues that it was during this last Palmerston government that the British embraced splendid isolation. However, the Crimean War may be a more appropriate starting point.
  - 10 Eichhorn, ‘Intervention Crisis’, pp. 287–310.
  - 11 *Writings and Speeches*, ed. Barnett Smith, pp. 134, 215–16.
  - 12 Hansard, Parl Deb. (series 3) vol. 199, cols. 390–1 (15 Feb. 1870). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1870/feb/15/first-reading>
  - 13 Parry, *Rise and Fall*, pp. 289–90; K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation 1846–1886* (Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 601–4. Also see Robert Biddulph, *Lord Cardwell at the War Office: A History of His Administration, 1868–1874* (John Murray, 1904).
  - 14 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 3) vol 203, cols. 1286–1300 (1 Aug. 1870). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1870/aug/01/the-war-observations>
  - 15 Ibid.
  - 16 Ibid.
  - 17 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 3) vol. 204, col. 454 (17 Feb. 1871). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1871/feb/17/france-and-germany-terms-of-peace>
  - 18 Michael J. Winstanley, *Gladstone and the Liberal Party* (Routledge, 1990), p. 49.
  - 19 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 3) vol 205, col. 919 (30 Mar. 1871). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1871/mar/30/resolution>
  - 20 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 3) vol. 205, cols. 936–8 (30 Mar. 1871). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1871/mat/30/resolution>
  - 21 Joseph A. Fry, *Lincoln, Seward, and US Foreign Relation in the Civil War Era* (University Press of Kentucky, 2019), p. 188.
  - 22 James McPherson, ‘“The Whole Family of Man”: Lincoln and the Last Best Hope Abroad’, in Robert E. May (ed.), *The North, The South, and the Atlantic Rim*, (1995. University Press of Florida, 2013), p. 161.
  - 23 Jocelyn Hunt, *Britain, 1846–1919* (Routledge, 2003), pp. 39–40.
  - 24 This argument is also made by David P. Crook, *American Democracy in English Politics: 1815–1850* (Clarendon Press, 1965) and more recently O’Connor, *American Sectionalism*.
  - 25 Winstanley, *Gladstone*, p. 66.

- 26 Niels Eichhorn, 'Democracy: The Civil War and the Transnational Struggle for Electoral Reform', *American Nineteenth Century History*, 20 (2019), pp. 293–313. Also see Robert Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848–1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Ashgate, 2011).
- 27 Winstanley, *Gladstone*, p. 13.
- 28 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 3) vol. 200, cols. 10–32 (16 Mar. 1870). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1870/mar/16/second-reading>.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 3) vol. 200, cols. 32–3 (16 Mar. 1870). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1870/mar/16/second-reading>
- 34 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 3) vol. 200, cols. 52–3 (16 Mar. 1870). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1870/mar/16/second-reading>
- 35 Collings, 24 Mar. 1884, Representation of the People, 686. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1884/mar/24/second-reading-first-night>
- 36 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 3) vol. 286, cols. 660–1 (24 Mar. 1884). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1884/mar/24/second-reading-first-night>
- 37 See Adam Fairclough, *Bulldozed and Betrayed: Louisiana and the Stolen Elections of 1876* (Louisiana State University Press, 2021).
- 38 *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 Sep. 1880.
- 39 See R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society, 1848–82* (Wolfhound Press, 1985); Brian Jenkins, *Fenians and Anglo-American Relations during Reconstruction* (Cornell University Press, 1969); Brian Jenkins, *The Fenian Problem: Insurgency and Terrorism in a Liberal State, 1858–1874* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008).
- 40 As Grenfell Morton illustrated in *Home Rule and the Irish Question* (Longman; 1980), Gladstone had been interested in the Irish Question since the 1840s and, once given a chance, worked to ease tensions with things like the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. Jeremy Smith in *Britain and Ireland: From Home Rule to Independence* (Longman, 1999) argues that Gladstone's good intentions for Ireland ran into significant opposition and turned the topic into something more difficult than he had expected.
- 41 Hunt, *Britain*, pp. 210–11.
- 42 Edmond George Petty Fitzmaurice, *The Life of Granville George Leveson Gower: Second Earl Granville, K.G., 1815–1891*, vol. ii (Longmans, Green, 1905), p. 2.
- 43 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 3) vol. 181, cols. 1027–54 (23 Feb. 1866). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1866/feb/23/question-11>
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Quoted in *The Speeches and Public Addresses of the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone: With Notes and Introductions*, eds. Arthur Wollaston Hutton and Herman Cohen, vol. ix (Methuen, 1892), pp. 69, 95–9.
- 46 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 3) vol. 306, cols. 1145–245 (7 Jun. 1886). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1886/jun/07/second-reading-adjourned-debate>
- 47 Theodore Koditschek, *Liberalism, Imperialism and the Historical Imagination: Nineteenth Century Visions of Great Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 178.
- 48 For a study on the Alabama claims, see Phillip E. Myers, *Dissolving Tensions: Rapprochement and Resolution in British–American–Canadian Relations in the Treaty of Washington Era, 1865–1914* (Kent University Press, 2015).
- 49 Boyd Hilton, 'Utilitarian or neo-Foxite Whig? Robert Lowe as Chancellor of the Exchequer', in E. H. H. Green and Duncan Tanner (eds.), *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 61.
- 50 Hansard, Parl. Deb. (series 3) vol. 206, cols. 698701 (12 May 1871). <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1871/may/12/question>
- 51 Quoted in Arthur D. Elliot, *The Life of George Joachim Goschen, First Viscount Goschen* (Longmans, Green, 1911), 1:133–5.
- 52 William Ewart Gladstone, 'Kin Beyond Sea', *North American Review*, 264 (Sep. 1878), p. 212.