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Source: *The New England Quarterly*, Jun., 1964, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Jun., 1964), pp. 224-241

Published by: The New England Quarterly, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/364012>

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GEORGE BANCROFT IN BERLIN: 1867-1874

HENRY BLUMENTHAL

TWICE in his lifetime George Bancroft served his country in a diplomatic capacity.¹ In the late 1840's, at the time of the Mexican War and the mid-century European revolutions, he represented the United States in Great Britain. Two decades later, again at a time of war and ferment, the distinguished American historian and statesman headed the American legation in Berlin. His erudition, social grace, and political acumen qualified him as eminently for these important posts as his pronounced anti-British and pro-German prejudices ought to have disqualified him. The role he played prior to and during the Franco-Prussian War has indeed remained a matter of controversy.

I

It is well known that Bancroft cherished an extraordinary affection for Germany. Having studied in his youth at the universities of Göttingen and Berlin and having acquired an intimate familiarity with German culture and institutions,² he became deeply convinced of the existence of a cultural and political kinship between Germans and Americans. The relationship between Prussianism and Puritanism, particularly as far as work habits and standards of public morality were concerned, impressed him as much as the Protestant ties which in his judgment linked the two liberty-loving nations. To his delight, he not only noted many political similarities in the federal systems of Germany and the United States, but his study of German institutions had also led him to the conclu-

¹ For detailed background, see Russel B. Nye, *George Bancroft-Brahmin Rebel* (New York, 1945); Otto zu Stolberg-Wernigerode, *Germany and the United States during the Era of Bismarck* (Philadelphia, 1937); and M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft* (New York, 1908).

² Upon his return to the United States, he published essays on Goethe and Herder and translated, among other works, some of Goethe's and Schiller's poems. See O. W. Long, "Goethe and Bancroft," *Studies in Philology*, xxviii, 288-297 (1931); J. W. Rathbun, "George Bancroft on Man and History," *Trans. Wisconsin Acad. of Sciences, Arts and Letters*, XLIII, 51-73 (1954).

sion that monarchical Germany observed more principles of "law respecting republicanism than any other state of Europe, not excepting England."³

So strong were these convictions that at the age of sixty-seven Bancroft turned down the offer of the lucrative Boston Collectorship to accept instead the commission as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Prussia. Several reasons induced him to make this decision. The pleasant prospect of renewing many old friendships and the appealing attributes of his diplomatic status frankly influenced the former minister of the United States to the Court of St. James's. More important, however, than these personal considerations was his desire to serve the enlightened interests of Germany as well as of those of his own country. Significantly, Bancroft's liberal-minded German friends welcomed the appointment of an American minister whom they regarded as one of theirs. They expected him to be "a strong and influential supporter of the unification and liberty of our nation."⁴

Within a short time after his arrival in Berlin his residence became a favorite center of Prussian society. Few foreigners ever enjoyed the trust and confidence of the intellectual and political leaders of Prussia as wholeheartedly as Bancroft. Even the royal family tried to make him feel at home from the moment he presented his credentials to the King. By the time he ended his diplomatic career (1874), the Royal Academy of Prussia and several German universities had bestowed many honors on the American interpreter of German ideals and aspirations. In Bancroft's case, Prussian royalty and aristocracy seemed to be as sincerely attracted to the renowned citizen of a republic as his own ego felt flattered by the attentions of the Prussian nobility.⁵

³ Bancroft to Fish, Oct. 17, 1870. State Dept., *Despatches*, Germany. See also Otto zu Stolberg-Wernigerode, "Unbekannte Gespräche mit Bismarck," *Süd-deutsche Monatshefte*, xxvii, 299-308 (1930).

⁴ Prof. Karl F. Neumann to Bancroft, Berlin, June 4, 1867. Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter cited MHS).

⁵ J. A. Lukacs, "Bancroft: The Historian as Celebrity," *American Heritage*,

In a message to the University of Göttingen, Prince Otto von Bismarck recalled in 1890 that he "had the privilege of counting John L. Motley and George Bancroft among my intimate friends."⁶ It was through Motley, his roommate during his university student years, that Bismarck developed his curious interest in America and Americans. The walls of his estates at Friedrichsruh, Schoenhausen, and Varzin, for instance, displayed an extraordinarily large number of portraits of Americans, including that of Bancroft.⁷

Bismarck and Bancroft felt completely at ease in each other's company. The Prussian statesman liked the New Englander's cultural repose, common sense, dry humor, and good cigars. The two met frequently and could often be seen together horseback riding in the Berlin Tiergarten. To the amazement of the Diplomatic Corps in Berlin, Bancroft enjoyed the distinction of having been the only member of the Corps whom Bismarck ever invited to his Varzin retreat.⁸ Even more significant, his office was always open to the American minister whom he did not hesitate to consult occasionally on strictly European problems. As early as January 1868 Count Vincent Benedetti, the French Ambassador in Berlin, alerted the Quai d'Orsay to the fact that the rapport between Bismarck and Bancroft was "of the most perfect cordiality." By the end of the same year the chargé d'affaires of the French Embassy expressed his contempt for the American envoy in a dispatch in which he contended that "one begins to understand in Berlin that Bancroft's eccentricities and vanities reflect his excessive desire for popularity."⁹

While this comment revealed the growing resentment the

xii, 65-69 (1961); W. M. Sloane, "George Bancroft—in Society," *Century Magazine*, xxxiii, 473-487 (1887); and J. G. Wilson, "Aus ungedruckten Briefen George Bancrofts," *Deutsche Revue*, xxiv, 74-85 (1899).

⁶ Göttingen Universität, *Festreden*, July 4, 1890.

⁷ S. Whitman, *Personal Reminiscences of Prince Bismarck* (New York, 1903), 33-34; see also L. L. Snyder, *Die persönlichen und politischen Beziehungen Bismarcks zu Amerikanern* (Darmstadt, 1932).

⁸ *Proceedings of the Worcester Society of Antiquity*, Oct. 1900, p. 15.

⁹ Lefèbvre de Béhaine to Moustier, Berlin, Nov. 16, 1868. French Foreign Office Archives, *Corresp. Politique*, Prusse, v. 371. See also Benedetti to Moustier,

French harbored against a diplomat who made no secret of his strong pro-German feelings, it represented a viewpoint completely at variance with that of Bismarck. The Prussian leader thought so highly of him that in the fall of 1869 he solicited Motley's assistance in his successful effort to prevent Bancroft's removal from his post in Berlin. Bismarck suspected "French influence at work" behind the intrigues against the American minister who "is better than most European career diplomats."¹⁰ Reminiscing in 1896, he again described him as "the ideal American ambassador."¹¹

Such a favorable appraisal was not surprising in view of Bancroft's unqualified support of Germany's unification and his high regard for the virtues and accomplishments of the German people. Bismarck also knew that the New Englander respected and admired him. Bancroft looked upon the German leader as the towering statesman of his age, "the pilot in the tempest who is great on great occasions." In his correspondence as well as in an unpublished "Sketch of the Character of Bismarck," he depicted the architect of the German Reich as a very human person, "moderate in the hour of success," and fearlessly pursuing his policies "without a thought of any personal advantage."¹² In his estimate, the Iron Chancellor not only loved personal liberty, but he also advanced the cause of liberty in Europe. Unlike Prussian ultraconservatives, Count Bismarck neither feared nor categorically opposed republicanism. Institutional questions did not concern him as much as the unification of Germany under Prussia's leadership. "This," Bancroft believed, "he could not have accomplished, except as the leader of the Conservative Party in Prussia."¹³

Berlin, Jan. 20, 1868, *ibid.*, v. 368; and Lefèvre de Béhaine to La Tour d'Auvergne, Berlin, Aug. 14, 1869, *ibid.*, v. 375.

¹⁰ John L. Motley, *The Correspondence of John Lothrop Motley* (New York, 1900), III, 225.

¹¹ Heinrich von Poschinger, *Conversations with Bismarck* (New York, 1900), 285.

¹² This manuscript is among the George Bancroft Papers in the New York Public Library.

¹³ Bancroft to Countess von Andrassy, Berlin, Oct. 27, 1868. Bancroft Papers. MHS.

II

Keeping in mind that in the era of Bismarck the United States was neither a strong military power nor disposed to throw its weight into the scale of European conflicts, one wonders why the master of Realpolitik went out of his way to attach so much importance to the United States and its minister. Certainly personal feelings alone do not explain his sympathetic attitude towards the United States during the crucial Civil War and early Reconstruction period. During those years he lent tangible support to the cause of the Federal Union by urging German bankers to extend loans to the North and by weakening Napoleon's position in Mexico. It seemed to be more than a friendly gesture, moreover, that prompted him to applaud the acquisition of Alaska.¹⁴

That Bismarck manifested this interest in the United States even before he established his friendship with Bancroft should serve as a reminder that his American policies must be interpreted in terms of the value of the United States to Prussia. Important as his personal relationship with Bancroft may have been in the implementation of his foreign policies, it naturally was of a subordinate nature.

Prussia's cultivation of friendly ties with the United States, particularly during the 1860's, was related to its European policies. Thus, Bismarck's Machiavellian instructions in 1866 to von der Goltz, the Prussian Ambassador in France, revealed his desire, above all else, to exploit Napoleon's dilemma in Mexico so as to minimize French intervention in the impending showdown with Austria.¹⁵ By supporting the preservation of the American Union, Bismarck placed himself in a strong position to claim at least America's moral support for the unification of Germany. And by openly applauding the expansion of the United States, he may have attempted to convey the impression that, under certain circumstances, the growing

¹⁴ Alfred Vagts, *Deutschland und die Vereinigten Staaten in der Weltpolitik* (New York, 1935), II, 1914; Ludwig Reiners, *Bismarck* (München, 1957), II, 464.

¹⁵ H. Blumenthal, *A Reappraisal of Franco-American Relations, 1830-1871* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1959), 176.

trans-Atlantic sea power might possibly act as a counterpoise to the maritime powers of Europe. As the leader of a land power, Bismarck rather wishfully hoped to be able to count on the naval resources of the United States, should the future need for them arise. His inquiry in this regard just prior to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War leaves no doubt about this long-range speculation. On July 12, 1870, he instructed Secretary of State von Thile to determine whether in case of war the United States would grant Germany "the means of maritime defense." He had specifically in mind to fit out ships in American ports for the purpose of harassing French merchantmen on the high seas.¹⁶

Available evidence also shows that several years prior to this war, a war in which most European powers might possibly side against Germany, Bismarck included the United States in his policy planning. Supplementing his skilful maneuvers in Europe to secure the neutrality of Austria, Italy, and Russia in case of a war with France, Bismarck's main objective in his dealings with the United States prior to 1870 appears to have been to assure himself of America's benevolent neutrality. He was keenly interested in seeing to it, moreover, that if Germany could not receive any material assistance from the United States in such a war, neither should France obtain it. On August 29, 1867, Bancroft reported to Secretary of State William H. Seward that, while the Prussians expected the United States to remain neutral in case of a European conflict, they also suggested how the neutral United States could render them a service. After a long conversation with the Prussian King and Bismarck, he informed the State Department: "It is seen that in the event of war in Europe, the assertion of the rights of neutrals would devolve very much on the United States."¹⁷ Carl Schurz's conversation with Bismarck in January of 1868 further confirms the Prussian leader's preoccupation with what he then regarded as an inevitable war with France and

¹⁶ Hamilton Fish, *Diary*, July 12, 1870. Hamilton Fish Papers. See also Moritz Busch, *Tagebuchblätter* (Leipzig, 1899), I, 189.

¹⁷ Bancroft to Seward, Berlin, Aug. 29, 1867. Bancroft Papers. MHS.

America's likely attitude regarding it.¹⁸ In his letter of November 23, 1868 to von der Heydt, the Prussian Minister of Finance, Bismarck went so far as to express his opinion that "in case of need, we can most likely count on America's friendship." Revealingly, though, he cautioned von der Heydt: "... but official mention of this could be harmful."¹⁹

In spite of the strained relations between the United States and the government of Napoleon III, Bismarck could not ignore the fact that the American people felt traditionally attached to the French people. It seemed therefore important to him, regardless of who represented the United States in Berlin, to pursue a course that in times of war would dispose America to favor Germany. He knew very well that the achievement of this policy objective would be greatly aided by the fact that "Germany had in the United States her second largest state after Prussia."²⁰ France could not match this reservoir of goodwill and political pressure in the United States. Prussia's traditional friendship with the United States, growing trade relations, and Bancroft's wholehearted cooperation also seemed to justify an optimistic outlook about the future of German-American relations.²¹

In his successful negotiation of the first naturalization treaty, which established in international law the right of expatriation, Bancroft capitalized on Bismarck's desire to strengthen the bonds between Germans and German-Americans as well as those between Germany and the United States. German immigration into the United States, he contended, benefited the political and trade interests of both countries, without exhausting the manpower resources of Prussia. For experience confirmed the theory that this emigration from Germany promoted rather than diminished population growth in Ger-

¹⁸ Carl Schurz, *Lebenserinnerungen* (Berlin, 1907), II, 494-501.

¹⁹ Quoted from Robert von Keudell, *Fürst und Fürstin Bismarck* (Berlin, 1901), 400-401.

²⁰ Charles Sumner, *Works* (Boston, 1883), XIV, 151-152.

²¹ Otto zu Stolberg-Wernigerode, "Bismarck and his American Friends," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, v, 394-410 (July, 1929).

many.²² Surely, Bancroft argued persuasively, since immigration was mutually beneficial, immigrants ought to be benefited by the adoption of generous laws for the protection of their rights. It was no easy task to reach agreement on the details of this treaty. In the end, it required the personal intervention of Bismarck to explain to the Prussian negotiators that Prussia's interests would be served by granting America the concessions it desired.

III

As intelligent and experienced a man as Bancroft must have realized that the promotion of national interests imposes limitations on personal friendships and predilections. Unfortunately, though, his Germanophilism led him to be carried away by the notion that the interests of Germany and the United States were identical. To his mind, the closest coöperation between two predominantly Protestant countries held out the greatest promise for the enlightened progress and peace of the world. Like Carl Schurz and other German-Americans, he wished to see them become the leaders of the world. Skeptical of the dispositions of Great Britain, France, and Russia, he recommended: "If we need the solid, trusty good will of any government in Europe, we can have it best with Germany."²³ This proven friend, he had convinced himself, shared the American people's love of freedom and longing for peace. Based on past experiences, Bancroft noted with satisfaction that Germany liked to coördinate its policies in the Pacific region with those of the United States. In the Western Hemisphere, it recognized the predominance of North America. And as far as the development of the commercial relations between the two expanding industrial countries was concerned, the prospects looked very promising.

This view contrasted sharply with his evaluation of French policies. Unable to forget the intermeddling maneuvers of

²² For an elaboration of these arguments, see *George Bancroft Papers, Miscellaneous (Berlin period)*, New York Public Library.

²³ Bancroft to Fish, Berlin, Oct. 18, 1870. *Hamilton Fish Papers, Correspondence*, vol. 73.

Napoleon III during the Civil War and in Mexico, he welcomed the downfall of the Second French Empire. In his judgment, the devoutly Catholic French Emperor had not only trampled upon the constitutional liberties of the freedom-loving French people, in all parts of the world he had also displayed ambitions of a very disturbing nature. With respect to the question of German unification, Bancroft strongly urged the Secretary of State to uphold the American principle of permitting all peoples the right to reform their political institutions without foreign interference.²⁴ He accused Napoleon, as far as Germany was concerned, of disregarding his professed loyalty to the principle of nationalities.

The self-confident American minister in Berlin attempted time and again to take the lead in shaping American foreign policy in conformity with his personal viewpoints. In the course of a private dinner conversation in the fall of 1868, for instance, he told his guests, among them high ranking German officials and members of the Diplomatic Corps, that the United States could hardly be expected to remain neutral in the eventuality of a Franco-Prussian war, "particularly if the North Sea ports should be blockaded."²⁵ Whatever indiscretions he committed on that occasion, he later insisted that the detrimental economic consequences of such a war, not anti-French or pro-German sentiments, influenced his thinking. The United States, he feared, would be hurt by the interruption of trade and immigration.

According to Bancroft's knowledge, the more than 100,000 German immigrants brought "not less than seventy-five million dollars each year to the United States." The total yearly net gain to the United States, including the value of these immigrants' labor, was then estimated to have amounted to

²⁴ Bancroft to Seward, Berlin, Nov. 3, 1867 and Nov. 20, 1868. State Dept., *Despatches*, Prussia.

²⁵ Bancroft to Dix, Berlin, Dec. 29, 1868. Bancroft Papers. MHS. See also von der Heydt to Bismarck, Berlin, Nov. 20, 1868. German Foreign Ministry Archives, 1867-1920, *Acta betreffend Bismarcks vertrauliche Correspondenz*, U.C. Camera, U.C. 1, reel 68, p. 82.

between one hundred and fifty and two hundred million dollars.²⁶ This immigration contributed, moreover, to the steady growth of the trade between Germany and the United States, which by the time of the War of 1870-1871 approached the sizable volume of Franco-American trade. A military conflict between France and Germany threatened therefore to be so costly to the United States that Bancroft regarded its prevention as the best means of protecting his country's economic interests. As he saw it, America's prosperity was worth a diplomatic indiscretion. For then he still believed that neither Napoleon nor Bismarck wanted war and that his observation might contribute toward the preservation of peace.

After the outbreak of hostilities, Bancroft employed his influence in a manner that left little to be desired from Germany's point of view. Repeatedly he tried to impress upon the Grant administration his conviction that the French Emperor was responsible for the war.²⁷ At the same time he prophesied that Napoleon III would fail in his attempt to prevent the rise of a strong Central European power and that Germany, rather than France, would emerge from the war as the strongest power on the continent of Europe. The Emperor's ambition, of course, was to bring about a confederation of European states under the leadership of France.

Bancroft's prophecy turned out to be more accurate than his opinion that, despite Prussia's honest efforts to avoid the war, the French Emperor had deliberately and frivolously brought it on.²⁸ While almost a century later historians are still unable to determine the responsibility for this war,²⁹ Bancroft had not the slightest doubt that Napoleon III, beset by domestic diffi-

²⁶ Bancroft to Dix, Dec. 29, 1868. MHS.

²⁷ Blumenthal, *A Reappraisal*, 183-206.

²⁸ Bancroft to Fish, Berlin, July 12 and 16, 1870. State Dept., *Despatches*, Germany.

²⁹ Two recent studies on this question merit special attention: Lawrence D. Steefel, *Bismarck, the Hohenzollern Candidacy, and the Origins of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962); and Werner Richter, *Bismarck* (Frankfurt a.M., 1962).

culties and jealous of Prussia's rising star,³⁰ made an incredible miscalculation when he decided to teach the Prussians that France was and intended to remain the leading continental power.³¹ By the middle of 1870 the French monarch had so little reservoir of good will left in the United States that few Americans were disposed to question the accuracy of Bancroft's opinion or to suspect Bismarck of having skilfully set a trap in which Napoleon got caught.

Although the United States was officially neutral in this war, the initial sentiments of the American people clearly favored Germany. The French declaration of war meant to them that Napoleon had decided to crush Prussia and thus to block the unification of Germany, using the dispute over the Hohenzollern candidacy merely as a pretext. They believed so firmly in the right of "34,000,000 people speaking the same language and inhabiting a contiguous territory,"³² to form a voluntary federal union that they disapproved of any attempt to interfere with this right. Stirred by the memory of their own history, many Americans became emotionally involved in Germany's struggle for a more perfect union. However, after the sudden collapse of the hated Second French Empire and its replacement by a republic, they objected to the quite unnecessary prolongation of the war. Their enthusiasm for Germany gradually gave way to increasing concern for the suffering French people and fears about Germany's power and political ambitions.

It is noteworthy that a few thousand miles away from home Bancroft did not experience similar reservations. He regretted

³⁰ It is noteworthy that Jules Berthemy, the French envoy to the United States, told Hamilton Fish on July 7, 1870 that "the popularity of the Emperor could not withstand the popular indignation that would be aroused by the elevation of Prince Hohenzollern to the Spanish throne. Hamilton Fish, *Diary*, 1.

³¹ According to Bancroft, Napoleon III would have been willing to "consent to the Union of Germany in exchange for German consent to the annexation of Belgium and Luxembourg to France." Bancroft to Fish, Berlin, July 27, 1870 and Oct. 23, 1871. State Dept., *Despatches*, Germany.

³² Quoted from President Grant's message to the Congress, Feb. 7, 1871.

the hardships of the French people and, though skeptical about their ability to govern themselves, he wished the new French republic success. But as far as he was concerned, unless France “renounced every thought of territorial conquests,” it could not be regenerated.³³ In the meantime, he did what he could to help the Germans in their triumphant cause. In September, when the “magnificent achievements of the German armies” elated him, he vainly suggested that Secretary of State Hamilton Fish issue “an energetic remonstrance against the needless cruelties exercised towards the Germans domiciled in France.”³⁴ In a confidential note to von Thile, the Prussian Secretary of State, he claimed personal credit for ascertaining the ineffectiveness of the French blockade in the North and Baltic Seas. Boastfully, he compared his prompt initiative in this matter with the slowness with which the British reacted to the French blockade. With the obvious intent of impressing upon the Germans the value of America’s friendship, he also reminded von Thile that President Grant’s second neutrality proclamation “has proved . . . a perfect protection of your commercial marine in our vicinage.”³⁵

On the question of peace, Bancroft saw eye to eye with Bismarck, who did not want to be pressed to premature peace negotiations, by America of all nations.³⁶ After the fall of the Second Empire, republican France hopefully expected the neutral United States at least to render it this diplomatic service. Elihu Washburne, the American minister in the besieged French capital, approvingly forwarded the official French re-

³³ Bancroft to Fish, Berlin, Dec. 11, 1870. Hamilton Fish Papers, *Corresp.*, v. 74.

³⁴ Bancroft to J. C. B. Davis, Berlin, Sept. 5, 1870. Secret and Confidential. J. C. Bancroft Davis Papers. In the same letter Bancroft also alluded to the desirability of seeing “from Mr. Fish some good strong word . . . expressing a complaint of a declaration of war so injurious to our commerce.” Such a letter, he thought, “would have a most important effect on the Germans, and perhaps in our elections carry them in November.”

³⁵ Bancroft to von Thile, Berlin, Nov. 8, 1870. Confidential and Not Official. Bancroft Papers. MHS.

³⁶ Otto von Bismarck, *Die Gesammelten Werke* (Berlin, 1931), vi, 464, 492.

quests for American mediation. But Bancroft strongly urged Secretary of State Fish to abstain from offering his good offices. If anything, the United States should exercise a counter-pressure against those neutrals who might be inclined to suggest mediation. Bancroft warned Fish that Germany would object to meddlesome intervention, no matter how well intentioned, and that it would rightfully seek territorial compensations as protection against future French aggressions. Lest the Germans be misunderstood, he emphasized that all they desired was lasting security. Their policy did not involve an attempt at aggrandizement at the expense of France.³⁷ Despite the advice of several influential American citizens not to abandon France in its hour of national tragedy, and despite those few skeptics who articulated their fears of Germany's militaristic and illiberal tendencies, the policies of the Grant administration appeared to be decisively influenced by Bancroft's recommendations. The President, who shared Bancroft's opinions about practically all aspects of the Franco-Prussian conflict,³⁸ in the end even added bitterness to France's disappointment when, on his envoy's advice and in accordance with customary protocol, he sent a congratulatory message to the newly elevated German Emperor.

An analysis of Grant's policy with respect to this war, nevertheless, leads to the conclusion that Bancroft's contribution to the formulation of this policy has been exaggerated. His foes and friends have attributed to him more power and influence than he actually possessed. At best, he may be credited with having persuasively reminded his government of the wisdom of its traditional nonintervention in European wars. Whatever Grant and Bancroft personally thought about the justice of the German cause, and whatever historic reasons underlay the sentiments of the American people for or against the respective belligerents, nonintervention happened to coincide

³⁷ Bancroft to Fish, Berlin, Sept. 11, 12, 21 and 24, 1870. State Dept., *Despatches, Germany*.

³⁸ See U. S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs* (New York, 1909), II, 390-391; and Hamilton Fish, *Diary*, II, Oct. 20 and 23, 1870.

with the best interests of the United States, as the responsible policy makers interpreted them.

All that Bancroft could endeavor to do prior to the war was to solidify American support of the unification of Germany. American public opinion already supported it in principle. The one important issue on which Bancroft could attempt to bring his influence to bear, namely, whether or not to offer the good offices of the United States for mediation, would obviously never have arisen, had the short war ended with the capture of Napoleon III. However, when triumphant Germany did no longer seem to be satisfied with the original limited objective of removing French obstacles to its unification and apparently started to embark upon a campaign to crush France, the neutral powers, including the United States, had to take cognizance of the completely changed situation. The political and economic consequences of a radical shift in the Old World's distribution of power called for a comprehensive analysis.

Unlike Bancroft, Secretary of State Fish was fully aware of the potential dangers a militarily and economically strong Germany might pose in the future. He also realized, however, that nothing short of a military challenge would have induced the Germans to modify their unexpectedly ambitious objectives. Aside from the astounding display of Germany's military might, which incidentally was a factor in Great Britain's reluctance to intervene,³⁹ America's military intervention was completely out of the question. The nation had not yet recovered from its own recent war. Even few Frenchmen expected the United States to send an expeditionary force. Diplomatic intervention, on the other hand, would have been a different matter,⁴⁰ had not Bismarck headed off neutral peace

³⁹ General Badeau to Fish, London, Aug. 30, 1870. Hamilton Fish Papers, *Correspondence*, v. 72.

⁴⁰ Unwilling to see France crushed and apprehensive of the possibility that victorious Germany "will be ambitious of becoming a great maritime power," Secretary Fish would have supported mediation in September of 1870. He did not believe, however, that the military situation was at that time conclusive enough for the contestants to reach an agreement on mutually acceptable

moves by making it known that he was not prepared to accept outside mediation. Any action or inaction on the part of the United States was therefore destined to displease one or the other belligerent. America's diplomatic silence disillusioned the French. But unwelcome American mediation would not only have caused resentment in Germany; it also would have produced undesirable political effects at home. These considerations prompted the Grant administration to move very carefully. Having arrived at the conclusion that neither a German victory nor the defeat of France would appreciably affect the fortunes of the United States, the administration deemed it most expedient to remain on the side lines.⁴¹ As a gesture to the country of Lafayette, it did nevertheless informally plead with the Germans not to impose a peace that would be "humiliating to the pride of the great [French] people."⁴²

It is important to stress that the administration made its decision in this delicate problem by way of an analysis of the national interest of the United States. Bancroft had in essence recommended the same policy, but his approach was entirely different; it was personal and with a strong German orientation. His belief that what was good for Germany also served the interests of his own country was not shared by the policy makers in Washington. Neither were they prepared to show any enthusiasm for his vision of a Berlin-Washington entente cordiale.

On the contrary, during the final years of his diplomatic service, the State Department felt compelled to make several inquiries about the recurring rumors that Germany sought to acquire St. Thomas and Samana Bay as well as colonial possessions in the Pacific. Rejecting these rumors as completely unfounded, Bancroft went to great pains in laying them to rest.

terms. Fish to Carl Schurz, Sept. 5, 1870. Hamilton Fish Papers, Letter Copy Book, III; and Fish to Washburne, Oct. 20, 1870. *Ibid.*

⁴¹ President Grant's annual message of Dec. 5, 1870 also suggests that he took advantage of the disquieting situation created by the war to impress upon Great Britain the desirability of settling the *Alabama* and other American claims.

⁴² Fish to Bancroft, Sept. 30, 1870. State Dept., *Instructions*, Germany.

In his judgment, Germany needed all its energies to maintain its leading position in Europe. He saw no danger for a long time to come that Germany would develop into "a power playing a part in the wider world."⁴³ It literally could not afford to become a first-rate naval power. In any case, he assured the officials in Washington just before his departure from Berlin, Prince Bismarck's policy "is a policy of peace . . . and there is no power on the globe whose friendship he is more disposed to cultivate than that of the United States."⁴⁴

IV

It was characteristic of the Jacksonian democrat in Berlin to point out, whenever an opportunity presented itself, how much the Germans resembled Americans in their outlook and institutions and how much both would profit from a close association. In his endeavor to present the Prussians in the most favorable light, he tended to resort to many exaggerations, both for the sake of immediate purposes and in preparation for an eventual Berlin-Washington entente. Before the establishment of the German Reich, he emphasized the liberal tendencies of the dynamic and independence-loving Prussians. Afterwards, he tried to appease his concerned countrymen by asserting that it would be unwarranted to attribute aggressive designs to the German government. At all times he related the prosperity of both countries to their expanding commercial intercourse. No German ambassador to the United States could have been a more effective spokesman than "the ideal American ambassador" in Berlin.

In view of the very limited role the United States then used to play in world affairs, one cannot escape feeling that one of Bancroft's ambitions was to demonstrate his ability to make history as well as write it. For he frequently sought to enhance

⁴³ Bancroft to Fish, Berlin, Nov. 18, Dec. 4, 1871 and March 4, 1872, State Dept., *Despatches*, Germany. In his dispatch of Dec. 4, Bancroft expressed the opinion: "Our interest would be advanced if the German Empire would be more of a naval power than it is likely to be. Towards us, it would never be aggressive."

⁴⁴ Bancroft to Fish, Berlin, May 25, 1874. *Ibid.*

the prestige of the United States by enlarging the scope of his personal diplomatic activities. As a diplomat who was on familiar terms with Bismarck and who enjoyed the reputation of being extremely well informed about European affairs, he was frequently consulted by his colleagues. He became thus more deeply involved in European diplomacy than was customary for nineteenth-century American officials.

In this capacity, too, Bismarck appreciated his assistance. In 1868, for instance, Bancroft played an active role in the establishment of diplomatic relations between Mexico and the North German Confederation. At the time of the Franco-Prussian War he endeavored to convince the Austrians that a united Germany would be their "natural ally." Germany and Austria, he suggested then, "have the strongest interest to enfranchise the Danube and the Black Sea."⁴⁵ That his journey to the Near East (1872) involved him in the related Eastern Question, may be gathered from the memoirs of Émile de Gontaut-Biron,⁴⁶ his French colleague in Berlin. Their quasi-confidential conversation on this question in March 1873 suggests that the French ambassador greatly valued the American's comments. He relayed them in minute detail to his foreign minister, apparently convinced that Bancroft echoed Bismarck's opinions.

With all his shortcomings and prejudices, George Bancroft ranks among the most resourceful and controversial diplomats the United States had sent abroad in the nineteenth century. With the exception of the naturalization question, there was little of importance for the head of the American legation in Berlin to do.⁴⁷ He busied himself therefore with the central issue

⁴⁵ Bancroft to Chevalier Mallman, Berlin, Dec. 18, 1870. Bancroft Papers. MHS.

⁴⁶ Émile de Gontaut-Biron, *Mon Ambassade en Allemagne, 1872-73* (Paris, 1906), 307.

⁴⁷ Among Bancroft's major accomplishments in Berlin ranks his presentation of the American argument in the San Juan arbitration case. The German Emperor, having been memorialized by Bancroft "to reconcile the two younger branches of the great Germanic family," decided this Anglo-American dispute in favor of the United States.

of his time, the unification of Germany. The excessive zeal he displayed in promoting the German cause invited criticism in many quarters and alerted his superiors in Washington to study his otherwise able and informative dispatches with caution. His restless personal drive and widely acknowledged prominence frequently tempted him to lead his government instead of merely following its instructions. Critical of the traditional orientation of American foreign policy toward Great Britain and France, the elder statesman would have preferred to see it substituted by close political and economic ties with Germany.

The notion of this alternative demonstrated, as did also his estimate of his ability to influence European developments, that in these respects Bancroft's sense of reality left something to be desired. This notion was at best historically premature. And as long as the United States was neither ready nor willing to become seriously entangled in inter-European affairs, it was neither proper nor sound for any of its ministers abroad to disregard this basic policy. Bancroft's strong personality and international reputation practically doomed him to be a victim of his self-importance in the diplomatic world. Nobody could question his usefulness to his government and Bismarck. But he deluded himself if he believed that his standing and position enabled him to guide German-American policies along a path chosen by him rather than by the governments in Berlin and Washington.