

The Height of the German Challenge:

The Venezuela Blockade, 1902–3

The years between the Spanish-American War and the First World War, when the United States put teeth into the Monroe Doctrine, are known as the era of protective imperialism. It is an appealing label, one that reminds Americans that they were not grabbing land for their own advantage, like the Europeans did. Theirs was a new, a different, a better imperialism. The United States would uplift Haiti. It would bring prosperity to the Virgin Islands. Americans would “teach the South American Republics to elect good men.” Above all, they would safeguard their security by protecting the hemisphere from the rapacious Europeans.¹

But which Europeans? England had passed the baton to the United States when it deferred to the Monroe Doctrine in the first Venezuela crisis of 1895, and Spain had been ejected from the region in 1898. France did not have a navy capable of projecting power so far. If the region needed protection, it was from one country only: Germany. Germany had an ambitious and mercurial kaiser at its helm, and it was building ships as fast as it could. U.S. presidents from William McKinley through Woodrow Wilson viewed Germany as a serious threat to the hemisphere, and even though many U.S. strategists considered Japan the more menacing nation after 1907, the U.S. Navy remained on the East Coast, facing Germany.

Did Germany threaten the region? The indictment was based largely on circumstantial evidence: the growth of the fleet, the intemperate remarks of the kaiser, the propaganda of the German colonial associations, the Darwinian assumption that Germany had to expand or perish, and the Reich’s persistent failure to bow gracefully to the Monroe Doctrine, that “special manifestation of American arrogance,” in the words of the *Hamburger Nachrichten*.²

1. Woodrow Wilson, quoted in Walter Hines Page, *The Life and Letters of Walter Hines Page*, 3 vols., ed. B. J. Hendrick (London, 1923–25), 1:204.

2. *Hamburger Nachrichten*, 9 February 1896. The classic text on the German threat is Alfred Vagts, *Deutschland und die Vereinigten Staaten in der Weltpolitik* [Germany and the United States in Weltpolitik], 2 vols. (New York, 1935). Vagts relentlessly demolished the notion of a German threat to the hemisphere. His book, however, was based on a very limited array of sources. Although frequently cited, the book’s thesis was either dismissed or adopted without further ado. Four decades would pass before scholars would reopen the case. To date, several monographs on Wilhelm’s policy toward specific Latin American countries have appeared. Two

The actions that raised American hackles—and that have been rallied ever since to demonstrate that Germany posed a threat to the region—prove to be, on closer inspection, a potent mix of German bombast and American paranoia. Thus, the U.S. press fretted that the Germans emigrating to Brazil were the advance guard of a Wilhelmine plot to see a new Germany flower in the hemisphere. But, in fact, Berlin actively opposed emigration to Brazil until 1896, and its interest in the hardy souls who ventured there after that was lackluster at best. Also, while the German navy did draw up war plans to crack the Monroe Doctrine, they were minor academic exercises that never won crucial support from the Imperial Naval Office, the army, or the kaiser. Finally, the infamous Zimmermann telegram seems to cap the indictment, but German policy in Mexico was deferential to the United States until the outbreak of war in Europe; rather than the culmination of decades of intrigue, the telegram was an anomaly, a function of wartime.³

One German action in the hemisphere seems to be the smoking gun. In 1902, the Reich joined England and Italy in a naval blockade of Venezuela. Here, it is said, Berlin revealed its true aggressive and opportunistic colors, manipulating England, viciously bombing Venezuelan ports, and risking war with the United States. It was only President Roosevelt's big stick (wielded quietly) that stayed the kaiser's hand.⁴

The evidence does not support this interpretation. Germany was, in fact, exceedingly cautious before, during, and after the blockade. Its policy was far from recklessly aggressive. It was timid.

The basic story is mundane. Battered by years of revolution and saddled with a fiery dictator, Venezuela was neither paying its bills nor compensating foreigners for damages suffered as a result of domestic turmoil. Numerous countries were aggrieved—about debt default, unsettled claims, and the blustering of the Venezuelan president, Cipriano Castro. "You owe money," the American minister to Caracas told Castro bluntly, "and sooner or later you will have to pay."⁵ In December 1902, Germany, England, and Italy imposed a naval blockade on Venezuela to force Castro to address their

scholars have written general studies of Wilhelmine policy in the region. Both turn Vagts on his head, arguing that there was indeed a German threat to the hemisphere: Holger Herwig, *The Politics of Frustration: The United States in German Naval Planning, 1889–1941* (Boston, 1976); and Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase, *Lateinamerika als Konfliktfeld der deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen, 1890–1903* [Latin America as the seedbed of conflict in German-American relations, 1890–1903] (Göttingen, 1985). I disagree. Nancy Mitchell, "The Danger of Dreams: Weltpolitik vs. Protective Imperialism" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1992) and "Germans in the Backyard," *Prologue* 24 (Summer 1992): 174–80.

3. See Mitchell, "Dreams."

4. See, for example, Fiebig-von Hase, *Lateinamerika*, 846–1044; Herwig, *Politics*, 76–80; David Healy, *Drive to Hegemony: The United States in the Caribbean, 1898–1917* (Madison, 1988), 100–106; and Richard H. Collin, *Theodore Roosevelt's Caribbean* (Baton Rouge, 1990), 95–123.

5. Herbert Bowen (U.S. minister at Caracas) to John Hay (U.S. secretary of state), 28 November 1902, Record Group 59, M79:T56, National Archives, Washington, DC (hereafter RG 59, followed by microfilm number).

grievances. It was standard operating procedure, classic gunboat diplomacy, a little arm-twisting that led to arbitration and the settlement of the claims.

Beneath the banality of the adventure lie fascinating hints of the true balance of power in the Caribbean basin at the time. It was a time of flux, of definition, in the Caribbean: England was retreating, Germany was waiting in the wings, the United States was hovering, and the Latin American countries were trying to hold on to independence. This was a time when the German fleet was stronger than the American fleet, and yet neither country had sufficient power to confidently assert hegemony; England was still the kingmaker.⁶

An analysis of German aims and ambitions in Venezuela helps to resolve persistent puzzles of English and American policy, particularly why England agreed to cooperate with Germany and how significant the role played by Theodore Roosevelt was. It was in Venezuela that Germany was most active in the hemisphere—and acting with the kingmaker in tow. It was the best possible situation for Germany; the worst imaginable for the United States. This was the height of the German challenge.

German traders were well ensconced in Venezuela by the turn of the century. German middlemen dominated the import/export sector and the informal banking system. A decade of revolution had brought hardship to these merchants and firms. A stream of complaints about the treatment of German nationals and entreaties for protection flowed back to the Wilhelmstrasse. The Reich's response was unfocused. There was a paucity of will—and ships—to mount a show of force. But in the summer of 1901, Reich Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow decided that Germany should respond. He saw no danger of the United States objecting, no danger of failure; he saw only a clear victory, a cheap ticket to enhanced status. It was this boon to German prestige that he stressed to the kaiser, the navy, and the Reichstag.⁷

6. On the superior strength of the German navy see "Solution of the Problem of 1903," RG 12, envelope C-1, Naval War College Archives, Newport, RI; "Germany War Plan," RG 80, box 10, General Board War Portfolio no. 1:5-Y, National Archives; "War with Germany," RG 8, U.S. Naval Operations Plans 1896 to 1900, subfile 1 (hereafter UNOpP), box 47, Naval War College Archives; Rogers, "Tactical Study of the Black Fleet," RG 12; Bernadou, "Tactical Study of the Black Fleet," RG 12; "Joint Army and Navy War Plans. Problem no. 2: Table Showing the Comparative Strength of the Naval Forces of Germany and the United States," RG 8, UNOpP, box 48; Evans to Long, 27 March 1902, RG 80, GB420-2, General Board Letters; Fiebig-von Hase, *Lateinamerika*, 500–506, 819–25; Harlow and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power* (Princeton, 1942), 252–55; and Ronald Spector, "Roosevelt, the Navy, and the Venezuela Controversy: 1902–1903," *American Neptune* 32 (1972): 259–63.

7. See Bülow to Wilhelm II, 30 December 1901, Venezuela 1, vol. 18, Auswärtiges Amt-Politisches Archiv, Bonn (hereafter Vz1, followed by volume); Bülow to Wilhelm II, 1 September 1902, in Johannes Lepsius et al., eds., *Die Grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette, 1871–1914* [The great policy of the European cabinets], 40 vols. (Berlin, 1922–27), 17:244–46 (hereafter GP); Bülow to Wilhelm II, 3 November 1902, GP 17:246–49. See also Georg Hebbinghaus (Admiralstab) memorandum, 24 August 1901, RM 5/5966, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (hereafter RM 5, followed by volume); Bülow, "Memo on German Claims in Venezuela," presented to the Reichstag on 8 December 1902, *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen*

Businessmen, imperialists, exporters, and right wingers called for intervention to collect the outstanding claims. Bülow hoped that successful coercion of Castro would strengthen the Reich in the Latin American market. Furthermore, the government faced the prospect of significant protest if it remained passive in the face of the outcry against Venezuela, and Bülow could ill afford this at a time when he needed to build support for a major tariff bill that was pending in the Reichstag.⁸

Bülow's primary motivation, however, in everything he did, was to please the kaiser. He would never have mooted the idea of a little gunboat diplomacy in Venezuela had he not thought that it would please Wilhelm. But when he discussed his plan with the emperor in December 1901, the result was not what he had anticipated. The kaiser did not approve.⁹ That Wilhelm—the allegedly impetuous emperor held in check only through the exertions of his civilian advisers—should display such caution turns preconceptions on their head. Navy secretary Alfred Tirpitz must have convinced him that an adventure in Venezuela would squander resources in a marginal theater while the Reich needed to conserve its fleet until it was built to full strength. Furthermore, Wilhelm had a sentimental reason to dislike Bülow's idea. In a flourish of naïve and narcissistic diplomacy, the kaiser put any action that could have antagonized the United States on hold while, in February and March 1902, he dispatched his brother, Prince Heinrich of Prussia, on a goodwill mission to the new world.¹⁰

Meanwhile, civil war raged in Venezuela, Castro remained defiant, and the German chargé d'affaires was frustrated. Bülow regrouped. It is testimony to the complexity and fluidity of European politics at the time that his *bête noir* salvaged his scheme for decisive action in Venezuela. A keystone of Bülow's foreign policy strategy was faith in the beneficent powers of Anglophobia. Hatred of England would nurture love of Germany. But in

des Reichstages [Stenographical reports of the sessions of the Reichstag], 10th leg., 2d sess. 1900/1903 (Berlin, 1903), sup. 7, doc. 786:4957–59; Bülow's speech in the Reichstag, 19 March 1903, *ibid.*, 287th sitting, 10:8719. On the German community in Venezuela (about one thousand strong) see Vagts, *Deutschland*, 1525–1635; Holger Herwig, *Germany's Vision of Empire in Venezuela, 1871–1914* (Princeton, 1986), 17–79, 87–92; and Fiebig-von Hase, *Lateinamerika*, 44–88, 120–40.

8. *Kölnische Zeitung*, 24 August 1901. For the domestic pressures on the chancellor see *Immediatbericht* Bülow's, 30 December 1901, V21:18; and Otto von Mühlberg (German under-secretary of state for foreign affairs) to Paul Count von Wolff-Metternich zur Gracht (German ambassador at London), no. IIIb.8423, 17 July 1902, V21:21.

9. See Bülow to Wilhelm II, 30 December 1901, V21:18; and diary, 11 January 1902, in Norman Rich and M. Fisher, eds., *The Holstein Papers*, vol. 4, *Correspondence, 1897–1909* (Cambridge, England, 1963), 245–46. On Bülow and the kaiser see Katharine Lerman, *The Chancellor as Courtier: Bernhard von Bülow and the Governance of Germany, 1900–1909* (Cambridge, England, 1990), 29–40, 86–102.

10. See Holger Herwig and J. León Helguera, *Alemania y el bloqueo internacional de Venezuela, 1902/03* [Germany and the international blockade of Venezuela, 1902–1903] (Caracas, 1977), 22–23; and the kaiser's marginalia on Bülow to Wilhelm II, 20 January 1902, *GP* 17:241–43.

January 1902, Bülow, not nicknamed “the eel” for nothing, was slithering toward the English.¹¹

The debate as to who first concocted the scheme of Anglo-German cooperation in Venezuela began in 1902 on the front pages of German, English, and American dailies and, albeit in less prominent places, continues to this day. “There is no question then that Germany first conceived of the idea of using force against Venezuela,” pens Warren Kneer, who has focused on the English side of the story. “It seems clear,” to Holger Herwig, who has looked primarily at the German side, “that the government in London in fact seized the lead.”¹²

The only thing that seems clear is that this was a case of dovetailing interests gelling at the same time. The British sounded out the Germans; the Germans sounded out the British. To assert that either party took the initiative and to dig feverishly through the archives for proof ignores the subtlety of life. In this decision, the question of who took the initiative is buried forever in innuendo, in inference, in the tone of voice, the raised eyebrow that leaves no paper trail.

In late 1901, Britain was concerned that Germany would embarrass it in Venezuela. It would look bad if Germany defended its citizens’ rights while Whitehall idled. Thus, the British Foreign Office began to toy with various approaches to Venezuela. In early January 1902, while the kaiser was sitting on Bülow’s proposal, the British undersecretary of state in charge of the American Department, Francis Villiers, was sounding out the German chargé in London about the possibility of “common action.” In July, the Wilhelmstrasse informed its ambassador at London, Count Paul von Wolff-Metternich, that it “thoroughly favored” a joint pacific blockade of Venezuela from December 1902 to March 1903.¹³ Metternich talked to Foreign Secretary Lord Lansdowne, who agreed “in principle” to the joint blockade.¹⁴

11. Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter (adviser to Wilhelm, diplomat, and foreign secretary 1910–1912) quoted in A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London, 1945), 147. For Bülow’s Anglophobia see diary, 7 November 1902, in Rich and Fisher, eds., *Holstein* 4:270; and Peter Winzen, *Bülow’s Weltmachtkonzept, Untersuchungen zur Frühphase seiner Aussenpolitik, 1897–1901* [Bülow’s world power concept: an investigation of the early phase of his foreign policy, 1897–1901] (Boppard-am-Rhein, 1977), 353–94.

12. Warren Kneer, *Great Britain and the Caribbean, 1901–1913* (East Lansing, 1975), 11; Herwig, *Vision*, 223.

13. Hermann Baron von Eckardstein (first secretary at London) to Auswärtiges Amt (hereafter AA), no. 6, 2 January 1902, Vz1:19; Mühlberg to Metternich, no. IIIb.8423, 17 July 1902, Vz1:21. On 12 July, Oswald von Richthofen (state secretary), Bülow, Sack (Reichsmarineamt), and Wilhelm Büchsel (Admiralstab) had met and recommended joint action in the fall. “Remarks on the Meeting of 12 July 1902,” Vz1:21.

14. Lansdowne to Villiers, filed with Arthur Larcom’s (senior clerk, American department) memorandum, 20 July 1902, Foreign Office Records, FO 80/443, Public Record Office, Kew, England (hereafter FO, with series and volume). See also Lansdowne to George Buchanan (British chargé at Caracas), 23 July 1902, FO 420/206. For Lansdowne’s hopes of better relations with Germany see Lansdowne to Frank Lascelles (ambassador at Berlin), 22 April 1902, FO 800/roll 11.

The alliance was not formalized, however, until 11 November, when an agreement that forbade the two allies to sign a separate peace with Venezuela was forged at Sandringham. "It is now too painfully clear that in this miserable Venezuela business the British nation has fallen into a trap laid by Germany," the *London Daily Mail* concluded with hindsight.¹⁵ This gives Germany too much credit: Great Britain willfully sauntered into a buzzsaw. Lansdowne "was caught napping."¹⁶

That Lansdowne miscalculated the American reaction is completely understandable. He would have had to have been a psychic—one who could see into the future as well as read people's minds—to have predicted the uproar in the United States.

Scholars frequently credit Theodore Roosevelt with masterful and subtle diplomacy in the affair. The president, they assert, was sending signals to the Europeans to fence off the American sphere, to define exactly what was meant by "this far and no farther."¹⁷ But if Roosevelt was being subtle, only he—and scholars sympathetic to him—was in on the game. The English, the Germans, and the Italians saw no subtlety in his signals. On the contrary, for them, Roosevelt's signals were as loud and clear as the Rough Rider himself.

First there were the words: The president's first message to Congress, in December 1901, explicitly stated that "We do not guarantee any [American] state against punishment if it misconducts itself, provided that punishment does not take the form of the acquisition of territory by any non-American power."¹⁸ These words were backed up by actions. Washington's response to European activity in the hemisphere in 1901 and 1902 was remarkably calm.

The United States had smiled benignly as the European powers had strong-armed Guatemala in 1901 and 1902.¹⁹ And in June 1902, the

15. *Daily Mail*, 16 December 1902. See also Lansdowne to Buchanan, 11 November 1902, FO 80/445. The British press's suspicions about the Sandringham visit were not stirred until the height of the crisis, when it was trying to determine how Britain had ended up in the mess. The press had covered the visit itself as a social and familial affair.

16. Lord George Hamilton (secretary of state for India) quoted in George Monger, *The End of Isolation, British Foreign Policy, 1900–1907* (London, 1963), 105–6. Lansdowne was preoccupied with the Education Bill, just as Bülow was absorbed with the tariff debate.

17. See, for example, Edmund Morris, " 'A Few Pregnant Days': Theodore Roosevelt and the Venezuelan Crisis of 1902," *Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal* (Winter 1989): 2–13; Fiebig-von Hase, *Latinamerika*, 880–900; Frederick W. Marks III, *Velvet on Iron: The Diplomacy of Theodore Roosevelt* (Lincoln, NE, 1979), 37–54; Edward Parsons, "The German-American Crisis of 1902–1903," *Historian* 33 (May 1971): 436–52; Howard Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power* (Baltimore, 1956), 403–32; and Seward Livermore, "Theodore Roosevelt, the American Navy, and the Venezuelan Crisis of 1902–1903," *American Historical Review* 51 (April 1946): 452–71.

18. Theodore Roosevelt, "Message of the President," 3 December 1901, U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1901* (Washington, 1903), xxxvi–xxxvii (hereafter *FRUS*, followed by year).

19. The Foreign Office initiated the joint pressure in March 1901; the elaborate scheme evolved over the course of the year, and its every twist and turn is preserved in voluminous

French provided Roosevelt another opportunity to flourish his infinitely subtle diplomacy. Aggrieved by the Venezuelans' imprisonment of seven French merchants, the commander of a French cruiser seized a Venezuelan gunboat and, according to a German captain on the scene, "informed him that he could not leave, and that he—the French captain—reserved the right to confiscate the Venezuelan ship." President Castro was indignant, but the seven Frenchmen were freed in "less than an hour" and a public apology was offered France. The American on the spot, Minister Herbert Bowen, considered the episode "irregular and reprehensible," but the State Department expressed not a whisper of displeasure to France.²⁰

In the autumn, it was the Germans' turn. When Haitian rebels aboard the *Crête-à-Pierrot* boarded a German steamship on the high seas and forced it to hand over weapons destined for the Haitian government, Wilhelm decided to dispatch the gunboat *Panther*, which proceeded to sink the Haitian vessel. (The rebel captain went down with his ship.) The kaiser, in the margins, was gleeful: "Bravo *Panther*!" The State Department's legal adviser, John Bassett Moore, labeled the sinking "illegal and excessive," but this bestirred neither the State Department nor the press. The *New York Times* told its readers, "Germany was quite within her rights in doing a little housecleaning on her own account."²¹

Nor had a ripple of alarm spread through the U.S. government or press when, in the summer of 1902, the British had hoisted the Union Jack on the island of Patos, between Trinidad and the Venezuelan coast. As real estate, the island was of questionable value, but the British were staking a territorial claim and therefore skirting dangerously close to the Monroe Doctrine. The Colonial Office recommended that Washington be consulted before any action was taken, but Lansdowne and Villiers decided that there was "no more reason to communicate with the United States about Patos than to

documentation. The United States is not mentioned once, not even in a minute. See especially FO 15/344 and FO 15/352. See also Hay to Hunter (U.S. minister to Guatemala), 22 March and 10 April 1902, RG 59, M77:roll 34; Alvey A. Adey (second assistant secretary of state) to Bowen, 10 August 1901, RG 59, M77:roll 175; Hunter to Hay, 22 March 1902, and James Bailey (U.S. chargé) to Hay, 24 July 1902, RG 59, M219:roll 65. The *New York Times* did not mention the incident. For a very good account see Kneer, *Great Britain*, 1–31.

20. Commander of *Falke* (Lt.-Commander Musculus) to Admiralstab, 26 June 1902 in Hebbinghaus to Richthofen, no. B.2957II, 21 July 1902, Vz1:21; *Le Temps*, 29 June 1902; Bowen to Hay, 10 August 1902, RG 59, M79:T56. See also *Le Figaro*, 28 and 29 June 1902; *L'Intransigeant*, 29 June 1902; *Le Temps*, 30 June 1902.

21. Vagts, *Deutschland*, 1497; Moore to Adey, 15 September 1902, John Hay Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC; *New York Times*, 11 September 1902. The kaiser's comment was leaked to the American and British press. See, for example, *New York Times*, 26 January 1903; *New York Herald*, 22 January 1903; *Manchester Guardian*, 26 January 1903. See also Schröder (Admiralstab) to Richthofen, no. B4094.II, 31 October 1902, with enclosed Military Political Reports of Captain Eckermann of the *Panther*, Haiti 1, vol. 12, Auswartiges Amt-Politisches Archiv, Bonn.

ask their leave to stay in Trinidad." They expected no trouble from Washington, and none was forthcoming.²²

Finally, Washington had ample opportunity to express displeasure at the impending collective blockade of Venezuela. It seized not one of these opportunities. In June 1901, the U.S. chargé in Caracas informed the State Department that Germany was contemplating applying pressure on Venezuela and wondered if Washington might be interested in joining a concert of powers. Secretary of State John Hay's response was the dry observation that it was not U.S. practice to join other powers in claims protests.²³

On 13 December the German ambassador at Washington, Theodor von Holleben, delivered a memorandum to the State Department stating that the Reich was contemplating blockading Venezuelan ports or temporarily occupying its customs houses in order to collect its debts. "Under no circumstances," Holleben hastened to add, "do we consider in our proceedings the acquisition or the permanent occupation of Venezuelan territory." In reply, Hay merely noted the president's address to Congress and expressed the expectation that Germany would keep its promises.²⁴

By October 1902, when the British Cabinet took up the coercion of Venezuela, Lansdowne was convinced that Britain could "assume the acquiescence of the United States." And in November, when England officially notified the United States of its imminent action in Venezuela, Hay's response was predictably low-key: "The United States government viewed [it] with regret . . . but they could not object . . . provided [it] . . . did not contemplate any territorial acquisition."²⁵

This was American diplomacy at its most straightforward. Words and actions coincided. The light was green. The Europeans had every reason to believe that they fully understood the Roosevelt administration's definition of the vague and elastic Monroe Doctrine. The United States would oppose the acquisition of territory, but none was planned. "The United States

22. Villiers's minute on C. P. Lucas (undersecretary of state, Colonial Office) to Villiers, 24 January 1902, FO 80/468. On the British claim to Patos see especially FO 80/468; and Admiralty Series 176696, Public Record Office (hereafter ADM series, followed by volume). The *New York Times* reported the dispute in a most cursory fashion on 21 and 23 September and 24 November 1902. In 1943, Britain ceded Patos to Venezuela.

23. W. W. Russell (U.S. chargé at Caracas) to Hay, 30 June 1901, and Hay to Russell, 17 July 1901, *FRUS* 1901, 550, 551.

24. Holleben to Hay, 13 December 1902, enclosing Imperial German Embassy, "Promemoria," 11 December 1901, and Hay to Holleben, 16 December 1901, enclosing Department of State, "Memorandum," 16 December 1902, *FRUS* 1901, 192-94, 195. The U.S. press, when informed of the German memorandum (printed in *FRUS* 1901), was the opposite of alarmed. The *New York Times* commented on the German government's "perfect consideration and politeness" (29 August 1902).

25. Lansdowne, "Proposed Coercion of Venezuela," memo no. 144, 17 October 1902, Cabinet and Committee of Imperial Defence Series 37/roll 18, vol. 63, Public Record Office (hereafter CAB series, followed by volume); Hay to Michael Herbert (British ambassador at Washington), 11 November 1902, U.S. Senate Documents, 58th Cong., 3d sess., no. 119, 782-83.

government knew very well that we did not wish to establish ourselves in Venezuela," Metternich asserted, "and we had received a free hand from them to move against the reprobate debtor." Lansdowne later echoed these sentiments in the House of Lords: "With so plain an indication as that of the policy of the United States Government, there was no reason why we should have had any misgiving."²⁶

What is striking in reading the British records of the Venezuela affair is how utterly marginal the United States was in the Foreign Office's conception of the operation. It is indicative of this lack of concern that, immediately before the matter was discussed by the Cabinet, Lansdowne asked Villiers, "Am I right in believing that the U.S. have publicly announced that they do not intend to raise objections?" In reply, Villiers referred not to any British correspondence with Washington (because there was none), but to the American response to the German probe of the previous December. Lansdowne then assured the Cabinet that "It will not be necessary to say anything as to our intention of doing this [coercing Venezuela with Germany] to the U.S. government, until we see the effect of our ultimatum." And this is exactly what they did: The British did not inform the Americans until 11 November, and they included not a hint of the fact that they would be joined by Germany.²⁷

Why this reticence, despite Anglo-American friendship? It is not that the idea of consulting Washington never occurred to the Foreign Office. On the original Admiralty go-ahead to the blockade, Lansdowne jotted, "We ought to give the U.S. timely warning of our intention." In August, he had even floated the idea to Metternich of inviting the United States to participate in the coercion of Venezuela. Germany did not object; it was Lansdowne himself who vetoed the idea.²⁸

The basic reason was that the British sincerely and understandably did not expect the Americans to object to their actions, which they thought would render swift results. But there were two further reasons. Lansdowne had been warned strongly and explicitly by the admiralty that it was crucial to the success of the seizure of the gunboats that the Venezuelans not have a hint of warning, for this would give them time to move their fleet up the Orinoco to shallow seas inaccessible to the British ships. In the words of the first lord of the admiralty, "This proposal must be kept a very dead secret as these gunboats may be put away somewhere." At the same time, the British

26. Metternich to AA, 15 December 1902, *GP* 17:263; Lansdowne, 2 March 1903, *Parliamentary Debates* 118:1067.

27. Lansdowne, "Proposed Coercion of Venezuela," memo no. 144, 17 October 1902, CAB 37/roll 18, vol. 63. See also Villiers memorandum for Lansdowne, 18 October 1902, FO 80/445; and Lansdowne to Herbert, 11 November 1902, FO 420/206.

28. Lansdowne minute on admiralty to Foreign Office, 14 August 1902, and Thomas H. Sanderson (permanent undersecretary of state) memorandum, 16 August 1902, with Lansdowne's minute, both in FO 80/444; Lansdowne to Lascelles, 19 August 1902, FO 420/206; Metternich to Bülow, 17 August 1902, and Mühlberg to Metternich, undated, both in VZ1:21.

minister to Caracas, William Haggard, had been battering the Foreign Office with vituperative reports of the unreliability—the intriguing against Britain and the currying of favor with the Venezuelans—of U.S. minister Bowen. “The greatest danger of this [a leak] would be if United States Minister were to know exactly what is intended,” Haggard warned from Caracas. The minute of the undersecretary was terse: “We have been careful not to tell the Americans (or anyone else) what we and the Germans intend to do.” If the Americans knew, Bowen would know; if Bowen knew, Castro would know.²⁹

Secondly, there is a tone in the Foreign Office minutes of bitter resignation about the rising U.S. hegemony in the Caribbean. The communications with Washington were perfunctory. The situation after 1895 was somewhat galling for the British. This emerges clearly in the discussion of Patos. Since the British expected no objection from the United States to their coercion of Venezuela, it is understandable that they decided not to spend any of their dignity unnecessarily.

The Germans proved more savvy about American sensibilities than did the British. True, they refused to recognize the Monroe Doctrine; they saw U.S. pretensions in the hemisphere as unjustified, impertinent, insolent, and not backed by adequate force. Nevertheless, the Germans were exceedingly cautious. In marked contrast to the Foreign Office, the Wilhelmstrasse referred to the expected reaction of the United States in virtually every major piece of correspondence on the Venezuela affair. When Roosevelt became president, Bülow was heartened by his seemingly pro-German outlook and was convinced that debt collection in Venezuela would not violate his interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine. Friedrich von Holstein and Albert von Quadt, the chargé in Washington, agreed with Bülow. They were also reassured by the attitude of the U.S. press. But Ambassador Holleben, although he stopped short of contradicting the chancellor, expressed his doubts and called for delays.³⁰

Nor were the navy and the kaiser convinced by Bülow's assurances. To persuade them, Bülow stressed throughout 1902 that the English were firmly committed to the undertaking, which, he added, embroidering the truth, had been their idea. (In early January 1902, the chancellor had been unenthusiastic about joining with the British, agreeing with Richthofen's comment, “We'll go our own way.” He changed his tune, however, when the kaiser rejected the proposed coercion.) It was difficult for Bülow to assuage all the kaiser's doubts. Wilhelm was worried that the British would

29. Lord Selborne (first lord of the admiralty) minute on Villiers to Admiralty, 22 October 1902, ADM 1/7620; Haggard to Lansdowne, 29 November 1902, with Villiers's minute, FO 80446.

30. See Quadt to Bülow, 23 August 1902, *GP* 17:111; Holleben to AA, no. 114, 30 November 1901, V21:18, and Holleben to Richthofen, 21 September 1901, Germany 138, vol. 21, *Auswärtiges Amt-Politisches Archiv* (hereafter *Ge* 138, followed by volume).

not be reliable allies. In January, he scrawled permission for Bülow to explore joint action with the British only "if we can be sure that they would not take advantage of these approaches in order to place us in a suspicious position with the Americans." Wilhelm feared that the British would leak information to the Yankees and that they might leave the Germans high and dry in the middle of the operation. These qualms were finally allayed just before the coercion began, when the "iron-clad" agreement was forged at Sandringham.³¹

Once it was certain that the alliance was firm, the kaiser welcomed it. Partnership with England would reassure Washington and deflect any criticism that the Americans might hurl Germany's way. It would reduce any risk to the German fleet both because the costs would be shared and because Germany could use British ports in the region for resupplying and recoaling. It would also alleviate Germany's increasing isolation by nudging it closer to England.³²

Germany sheltered in its partner's lee. This proud nation took extraordinary measures to avoid incurring the displeasure of both Washington and London. The acceptance of Italian participation in the blockade was British policy, not German. Throughout 1901 and 1902, when the Italians suspected that something was being planned, the Wilhelmstrasse was tight lipped. Stonewalled by their ally, the Italians turned to the British, who agreed to include them only after Rome had shrewdly pointed out that it could repay the favor in Somalia.³³

The British not only determined the participants; they also designed the operation. In October, Lansdowne suggested, "We should . . . in the first instance, address a final warning to the Venezuelans, and . . . if it is disregarded [inform them that] we are prepared to join with them [the Germans]

31. Eckardstein to AA, no. 6, 2 January 1902, with Bülow's and Richthofen's comments, VZ1:19; Wilhelm II, marginalia no. 2 on Bülow to Wilhelm II, 20 January 1902, *GP* 17:241-43. See also Bülow to Wilhelm II, 1 September 1902, *GP* 17:244-46. "Iron-clad" used in *New York Times*, 26 January 1903.

32. Bülow to Wilhelm II, 1 September 1902, *GP* 17:244-46. For the navy's welcome of British participation also see Bülow to Wilhelm II, 3 November 1902, *GP* 17:246-49.

33. For German stonewalling see, for example, Bülow to Wilhelm II, 20 January 1902, *GP* 17:242. For the British response see, for example, Haggard to Lansdowne, 30 November 1902, FO 80/446; Buchanan to Lansdowne, 2 December 1902, with Larcom's minute, FO 80/447; C. J. Thomas (Admiralstab) to Lord Walter Kerr (first sea lord), 6 December 1902, ADM 1/7620. For the linkage with Somalia see Lansdowne to Sir Rennell Rodd (British ambassador at Rome), 4 December 1902 (draft), FO 80/447; Giulio Prinetti (Italian foreign minister) to Alberto Panza (Italian ambassador at London), 4 December 1902, in Maurizio Vernassa, *Emigrazione, diplomazia e cannoniere. L'intervento italiano in Venezuela. (1902-1903)* [Emigration, diplomacy, and gunboats: the Italian intervention in Venezuela, 1902-1903] (Leghorn, 1980), 138; Lansdowne to Rodd, 5 December 1902, and memorandum reporting conversation with Panza, no date (filed after 5 December 1902), no signature, FO 80/447; and Lansdowne to Rodd, 20 December 1902, FO 800/roll 132. For Germany's continuing reservations about Italian participation see Lansdowne to Buchanan, 7 December 1902 (draft), and Metternich to Lansdowne, 10 December 1902, both in FO 80/447; and Bülow to Wilhelm II, 12 December 1902, *GP* 17:258-59.

in measures of coercion . . . [that is,] the seizure of the gun boats." This was followed to the letter.³⁴ The main sticking point was whether the allies would impose a peace blockade, as Germany wanted, or a war blockade, as England wanted. Germany preferred the former, as it did not necessitate a declaration of war from the Reichstag and interfered less with neutral (that is, American) vessels. England, on the other hand, was characteristically concerned with international law and saw no precedent for a peace blockade. Germany yielded to the English demand. "Since it seems highly desirable," Bülow wrote Wilhelm, "to convince the English that we go with them without reserve—hand-in-hand—I ask you to approve the English proposal."³⁵

On 9 December, receiving no response to their ultimata, England and Germany began to seize the vessels of the Venezuelan navy. Virtually all—"a few antiquated old tubs" crewed by men "who were more fishermen than sailors"—were captured in two days.³⁶ On land, however, the operation was meeting resistance: Castro arrested over two hundred German and English residents of Caracas, thundered nationalistic speeches, and called his countrymen to arms. And at sea, the Germans, unable to spare a ship to tow two captured and unseaworthy Venezuelan vessels to Curaçao, unceremoniously sank them. Furthermore, in response to an "insult to British flag," British and German ships shelled the town of Puerto Cabello. "When boys are naughty," British senior naval officer Commodore Montgomerie explained to the American consul at Puerto Cabello, "they should be spanked."³⁷

The British directed the bombing of Puerto Cabello. Montgomerie praised his German colleague: "German commodore backed me up most

34. Lansdowne's memorandum on Cabinet meeting, 21 October 1902, FO 80/445. See Bülow to Wilhelm II, 3 November 1902, with Wilhelm's marginalia, GP 17:246–49.

35. Bülow to Wilhelm II, 12 December 1902, GP 17:258. Neutral ships running a pacific blockade were turned away; those running a war blockade were sequestered. The correspondence on this issue is extensive. See especially Bülow to Wilhelm II, 20 January 1902, GP 17:241–43; Metternich to Lansdowne, 21 November 1902, FO 80/446; Richthofen to Metternich, 5 December 1902, GP 17:257; William Edward Davidson (legal adviser) memorandum, 8 December 1902, FO 80/448; Metternich to A.A., 9 December 1902, GP 17:257–58; Bülow to Wilhelm II, 12 December 1902, *ibid.*, 258–60; and Villiers's minute to Lansdowne, 13 December 1902, FO 80/448. Bülow consistently recommended a pacific blockade. See especially Johannes Kriege (adviser, AA), memo no. A328, 7 January 1902, and Admiral Otto von Diederichs (Chief, Admiralstab) to Richthofen, B.58, 8 January 1902, both in V21:19. On Germany's yielding to the British demand see Scheder (commander, east America division) to de Jong van Beek (governor, Curaçao), no. B485, 29 December 1902, RM38/131.

36. Mr. Phillips, 15 December 1902, *Parliamentary Debates* 116:1257; Manuel Rodríguez Campo, *Venezuela 1902: la crisis fiscal y el bloqueo* [Venezuela 1902: the fiscal crisis and the blockade] (Caracas, 1977), 227. See also Vice Admiral Archibald Douglas (British commander in chief, North Atlantic station) to Admiralty, 11 December 1902, ADM 1/7620.

37. Commodore Montgomerie (British senior naval officer) to Admiralty, 16 December 1902, ADM 1/7620; Volkmar (U.S. consul at Puerto Cabello) to David Hill (acting secretary of state), 16 December 1902, RG 59, T229:roll 12. See also ship's log, *Charybdis*, 13 and 14 December 1902, ADM 53/18468; Montgomerie to Scheder, 16 December 1902, RM38/131; and "Blockade of Venezuela, Vol. 3," RM38/132. For a vivid description of the sinking of the Venezuelan boats see Haggard to Lansdowne, 14 December 1902, FO 80/448.

loyally.” This was to be expected; the Germans took their lead from the British. Orders were sent to the German senior naval officer in Venezuelan waters to do only as the English did. The German traveled to Trinidad to confer with the English admiral—not vice versa. Germany sent only four ships to the British eight. Wilhelm commented: “The more ships the British send the better. The more our action fades into the background and theirs takes the foreground, the better. Of course we will follow the British program. I am against sending more of our ships to Venezuelan waters. Our flag is represented. Let’s leave the British up front.”³⁸

Castro continued to surprise the Europeans, who had expected him to capitulate abjectly. Instead, he sent Washington an offer to submit the dispute to arbitration. The State Department forwarded the request without comment to London and Berlin; it was received on 13 December, the day Puerto Cabello was bombed. Neither London nor Berlin relished the prospect of protracted negotiations with the dictator. Both worried about what guarantee they would have that any negotiated settlement would be enforced.³⁹

Spurred by the threat of arbitration, England hastened to move to the next stage: the blockade. A comedy of errors ensued. Whitehall had difficulty communicating with the British admiral, while the Germans were left in the dark. After three delays, the British blockade was mounted on 20 December; the so-called simultaneous German blockade staggered into place several days later. Meanwhile, on 18 December, both England and Germany had officially informed the United States that they would accept arbitration.⁴⁰

Much has been written about this decision. Theodore Roosevelt bequeathed this black hole of scholarship to future researchers when he claimed, almost fourteen years after the fact, that he had delivered a secret ultimatum to the Germans that had brought them to the bargaining table.

38. Montgomerie to Admiralty, 16 December 1902, ADM 1/7620; Wilhelm’s marginalia on Bülow to Wilhelm II, 12 December 1902, *GP* 17:260.

39. Bowen to Hay, 9 December 1902, *FRUS* 1902, 790; Hay to Charlemagne Tower (U.S. ambassador at Berlin), 12 December 1902, *ibid.*, 420; Hay to Henry White (U.S. chargé at London, acting ambassador), 12 December 1902, *ibid.*, 453; White to Hay, 13 December 1902, RG 59, M30:roll 193; White to Lansdowne, 13 December 1902, FO 80/448.

40. Tower to Hay, 18 and 19 December 1902, RG 59, M44:roll 96; White to Hay, 18 December 1902, RG 59, M30:roll 193. For the delays see Douglas to Admiralty, 2 December 1902, ADM 1/7620; Villiers’s minute on Douglas to Admiralty, 13 December 1902, and Lansdowne’s minute on Montgomerie to Admiralty, 16 December 1902, both in FO 80/448; Douglas to Admiralty, 17 December 1902, with Lansdowne’s minute, FO 80/448; Montgomerie to Douglas, 18 December 1902, RM38/131. For the German blockade see Plumacher (U.S. consul at Maracaibo) to Scheder, no. 1, 24 December 1902, RM38/137; Mathais Brewer (U.S. consul at La Guaira) to Scheder, 23 December 1902, RM38/137; Scheder, “Military Political Report: 27 December 1902–5 January 1903,” Curaçao, no. 497, 5 January 1903, enclosed in Schröder to Richthofen, no. B.450II, 4 February 1903, V21:23; Douglas to Admiralty, 22 December 1902, FO 80/449; and Bowen to Hay, 22 December 1902, RG 59, M79:T56. An “unofficial” blockade had been in force since the seizure of the ships.

The ex-president asserted that he had informed the hapless German ambassador that, if Berlin proved recalcitrant, he would unleash Admiral George Dewey's fleet (which at the moment was massed in unprecedented numbers at Puerto Rico) on the Reich's ships in Venezuelan waters.⁴¹

While it is true that the U.S. fleet was performing winter maneuvers in the Caribbean, not one document has been found to prove the president's assertion—not in the United States, not in Germany, and not in England.⁴² Not to worry, according to Frederick Marks, who turns the absence of evidence into a virtue: There must have been a gentlemanly conspiracy to destroy all documents pertaining to the kaiser's humiliation! Marks's thesis is unlikely, not only on the face of it but also according to the hard evidence. The persuasiveness of the alleged ultimatum was equivalent to the persuasiveness of Dewey's fleet. Let us suppose that every reference to the purported ultimatum and to Dewey's fleet was removed from the Wilhelmstrasse and Foreign Office records. There remains a further source, a "tamper-proof" source—the huge, bound admiralty ledgers. Into these tomes, a minion in the British Admiralty laboriously penned every reference to every ship and every seaman that appeared in every item of admiralty correspondence as it passed through the department. (For example, the *Crête-à-Pierrot* is listed and cross-referenced.) In the volumes for 1902, no mention is made of either Dewey or his ship.⁴³ Is it credible that in deference to the kaiser's ego the ledgers for 1902 were totally rewritten? And yet Roosevelt's claim sits, sucking scholar after scholar into convoluted, circumstantial arguments about the president's credibility: Did he or didn't he?⁴⁴

The question can be recast: Why did the Germans accept arbitration? The simple answer, one that does not rely on the credibility of an ex-president, is that Berlin accepted arbitration because the costs of the intervention were much higher than it had anticipated. Castro was not groveling, and the operation was precipitating a wave of anti-German vitriol in the British and American press. This reaction swelled to a crescendo during the

41. For Roosevelt's claim see Roosevelt to William Thayer, 21, 23, and 27 August 1916, in Elting Morison and John Blum, eds., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, MA, 1951–54), 8:1101–8. For the believers see Morris, "Pregnant Days," 2–13; Fiebig-von Hase, *Latinamerika*, 880–900; Marks, *Velvet*, 37–54; Parsons, "Crisis," 436–52; Beale, *Roosevelt*, 403–32; and Livermore, "Roosevelt," 452–71. For the mildly skeptical see Paul Holbo, "Perilous Obscurity: Public Diplomacy and the Press in the Venezuelan Crisis, 1902–1903," *Historian* 32 (1970): 428–48; Spector, "Controversy," 257–63. For the incredulous see Vagts, *Deutschland*, 1555–57, 1567–68, 1593–94, 1622; Dexter Perkins, *A History of the Monroe Doctrine* (Boston, 1941), 215–27; and Herwig, *Vision*, 205–7.

42. Not only is the alleged ultimatum not mentioned, the sole reference to the American admiral in the British Foreign Office and Admiralty archives is the following terse telegram: "The United States squadron . . . arrived on 21st and 23d December, and left again on 27th and 28th December. The visit was apparently merely for purpose of giving leave to the men, and had no political significance." Douglas to Admiralty, 1 January 1903, ADM 1/7696.

43. ADM 12/1371–1376.

44. Marks, *Velvet*, 37–54. For a recent restatement of Marks's thesis see Morris, "Pregnant Days," 2–13.

days that Berlin was considering Castro's offer. From the German point of view, Britain's press was particularly important. "The German Government . . . have been frightened by the tone of the English press," the English ambassador at Berlin explained. "They certainly do not wish to increase our difficulties with public opinion in England. The idea of arbitration did not smile on them, but they accepted it at once because we had proposed it. . . . The Germans are very sensitive about our Press which they believe has far more influence than it really has."⁴⁵

A main aim of the cooperation, after all, had been to improve Anglo-German relations, and German policy was to stay sheltered behind England. The kaiser was concerned that England would leave Germany out in the cold. The British press, therefore, was a weathervane, signaling the stresses on the Balfour government. The Wilhelmstrasse followed it closely; Metternich was a virtual clipping service.⁴⁶

The British press had expressed no alarm at the announcement of the cooperation in Venezuelan waters. But by 12 December, when articles about the seizure of the Venezuelan navy, the imminent blockade, and Castro's arrest of British and German residents appeared, the papers began to voice concern. What could England do if Castro refused to bow to the blockade? It could not seize territory – the Monroe Doctrine prohibited that; it could only loiter in Venezuelan waters, the victim of Castro's whims, all the while irritating the United States. America's goodwill was the most solid currency in British foreign relations; it was the steady point, the issue about which all shades of opinion agreed, "one of the cardinal principles of our national policy." It was clearly ludicrous to risk even a fraction of it to recover a paltry debt in Venezuela.⁴⁷

The British press was not worried about the response of the Roosevelt administration to the operation, but, unlike the Foreign Office, it was worried by the tone of the American papers. Initially, newspapers in the United States had expressed nothing more than alert complacency about the blockade; the Monroe Doctrine was not threatened, yet the situation bore watching. But from 13–18 December – with the sinking of the ships, the arrest of the Germans and English in Caracas, the bombing of Puerto Cabello, and

45. Lascelles to Sanderson, 27 December 1902, FO 800/roll 11. See also Lascelles to Lord Francis Knollys (private secretary to Edward VII), 9 January 1903, Lascelles to Lansdowne, 30 January 1903, and Lascelles to Lansdowne, 6 February 1903, all in FO 800/roll 11.

46. See Metternich to Bülow, 1, 16, 17, 20, 22, 23, and 27 December 1902, and 23, 24, and 30 January and 3, 4, 9, 17, and 22 February 1903, Vz1.

47. *Manchester Guardian*, 16 December 1902. This analysis of the British press is based on a close reading of the following British papers: *The Times*, the *Morning Post*, the *Daily Chronicle*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Spectator*, the *Westminster Gazette*, the *London Daily News*, the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Observer*, and *The Saturday Review*; and the following U.S. papers: the *New York Times*, the *New York Sun*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York World*, the *New York Herald*, the *Chicago Daily News*, the *Atlanta Constitution*, the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, the *Washington Evening Star*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Nation*. For a detailed analysis see Mitchell, "Dreams," 204–17.

Castro's spirited refusal to bow—U.S. editorials and headlines grew strident, blaming Germany and seeking solace in the presence of Dewey's fleet. The exact purpose of the fleet was not stated, but it was taken for granted that it greatly increased America's (unspecified) options.⁴⁸

Although the British papers carefully reported the rising concern of the American press, their absence of interest in Dewey's fleet is striking. Nor was Dewey's fleet mentioned once in any of the numerous scathing attacks on the government's policy delivered in the British Parliament.⁴⁹ This is, frankly, startling. It flies in the face of the common American supposition that Dewey's fleet was a powerful, even decisive, prophylactic. Unless one extends the Marks thesis (the bleaching of the diplomatic record) to the English press and Parliament, one is forced to conclude that the notion of the U.S. Navy intervening in—or contemplating war against England and Germany over—Venezuela was so ludicrous, so unbelievable, that it was of no interest to the British public. The British dailies were instead concerned that the venture, which they had expected to be swift and uncomplicated, might be prolonged and bloody.⁵⁰

"We cannot afford to endanger the good understanding between the two branches of the Anglo-Saxon race in order to chastise Don Cipriano Castro, and thereby to extract chestnuts for the mailed fist," remarked the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The alliance with Germany was unnecessary because the Royal Navy did not need the kaiser's boats to collect a debt in the Caribbean. "Have we come to this under our glorious Government—that we cannot face even a South American Republic without the help of our Teutonic

48. During the first week of December 1902, the naval war games were well covered by several U.S. papers, but until 11 December only a few explicitly linked Dewey's presence to the events in Venezuela. Only the *World* (17 December) and *Evening Star* (15 December) indicated what the fleet might do: escort U.S. ships to Venezuela if Germany insisted on imposing a peace blockade, which the United States would not recognize.

49. See *Parliamentary Debates* 116:237–38, 653–55, 914–15, 1105–9, 1212–13, 1224, 1245–87 (the debate), 1289–90, 1335, 1487–92, 1612.

50. In his study of Roosevelt's use of the press to signal American naval preparedness in the Caribbean, Paul Holbo concludes that the president's public diplomacy was ambiguous and subject to differing interpretations abroad. As for the British press's handling of the U.S. fleet maneuvers, he notes that the *Manchester Guardian* did not mention them (in fact, it did, twice, but only obliquely, on 5 and 13 December), that *The Times* mentioned them in the first week of December and then let the subject drop, and that the *Daily News* became alarmed as soon as it heard about them. But both *The Times* and the *Daily News* are anomalous in that they mention the U.S. fleet at all, and Holbo's interpretation of the latter is inaccurate: Its concerns were not linked to the fleet. The article that Holbo cites in support of this notion was penned by a chatty columnist whose opinions were distinct in tone and content from the paper's reportorial and editorial line. Holbo's study indicates the perils of relying on a small sample, even one that should have been, on the face of it, representative. Had he looked at more British newspapers, he would have seen that in England, Roosevelt's signal—if it was indeed a signal—was worse than ambiguous; it was invisible. Furthermore, scholars who have relied on Holbo's work—the only analysis of the press and the Venezuela crisis—have tended to ignore his nuanced and modest conclusions and have taken from his article the bald notion that the press, worldwide, was concerned with the U.S. fleet maneuvers. Holbo, "Perilous," 428–48. For other scholars' use of Holbo see Collin, *Theodore*, 106; and Fiebig-von Hase, *Latinamerika*, 849.

cousins?" the *Daily News* thundered. It was dangerous because England and Germany did not have the same attitude toward the Monroe Doctrine. It suited England, a sated colonizer and an American power, that the hemisphere be roped off to European colonization. It did not suit Germany.⁵¹

Thus, before learning that Castro had proposed arbitration, the British press suggested it. The conservative *Daily Mail* commented, "The conduct of the government has shattered its prestige and shaken its position in the country. The sooner it recognises the folly of its action the better."⁵²

The outcry in the British press had several repercussions. Not only did it mean that Anglo-German relations, far from being improved by the adventure, would be damaged, it also meant that England would, in all likelihood, accept arbitration. "I have learned," Metternich reported from London, "that in political circles here the fear is growing that the German/British action against Venezuela might lead to a cooling of relations with the United States, and I have also heard in strict confidence that the King views the action against Venezuela unfavorably." The next day, he cabled: "If the British government were supported in our joint action by British public opinion, the Parliament and the press, then we could look forward to the further unfolding of the action, without concerning ourselves with excessive American demands. Unfortunately this is not the case. . . . Reluctantly, I must therefore express my opinion that the sooner we get out of this business with honor, together with England, the better." Bülow might not have liked England's "inevitable bow to the United States," but he harbored no illusion as to its significance. "Tell Lansdowne," he wrote in reply, "that our basic consideration in Venezuela will be to avoid providing ammunition to those elements in England who oppose the government and oppose cooperation with Germany."⁵³

This submission to England was not just to preserve the semblance of cooperation between the two governments. It was also to reduce the risk of the Conservative government falling—which could happen, Metternich would write, "in the flick of a wrist"—and being replaced by the Liberals under Lord Rosebery, who would, Bülow posited, "be far more dangerous than Balfour."⁵⁴

Moreover, Bülow was worried about the durability of the "iron-clad" agreement. There were rumors that England might withdraw, leaving Germany exposed. "England . . . may easily . . . shake America's hand behind our back," was the warning from Ambassador Holleben in Washington. This was the eventuality that had haunted Tirpitz and the kaiser from the

51. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 15 December 1902; *Daily News*, 16 December 1902.

52. *Daily Mail*, 16 December 1902. See also *Daily Chronicle*, 12 December 1902; *Westminster Gazette*, 16 December 1902; and *Saturday Review*, 20 December 1902.

53. Metternich to AA, 15 December 1902, and Bülow to Metternich, 17 December 1902, *GP* 17:262, 266–67. "Inevitable bow" is from Metternich to Bülow, no. 74, 1 February 1903, *VZ* 1:23.

54. Metternich to Bülow, 4 February 1903, with Bülow's marginalia no. 4, *GP* 17:288–89.

first discussions of cooperation, the disaster from which they had sought to iron-clad themselves. Bülow's minute on this report sums up German policy: "His Majesty in the case of Venezuela will in no way go one step beyond England and will not take any step beyond England."⁵⁵

Not only was the Wilhelmstrasse edgy about its ally across the channel but it was also worried about Washington. It did not take remarkable prescience to imagine that the increasingly strident and anti-German tone of the press would percolate through the government if the operation dragged on, particularly if Germany had lost its shield.

And so, on 13 December when the Wilhelmstrasse received Castro's offer, what were its options? It could be obdurate, scoff at the arbitration proposal, and wait until the dictator agreed to satisfy the German demands without any unseemly and slow bargaining. But at what cost? First, at the simplest level, there was no guarantee that Venezuela, even if willing, would be able to pay its debts. But much more important was that if the Wilhelmstrasse rejected arbitration it would, in all likelihood, face the humiliation, cost, and danger of losing the alliance with Britain—either in fact or in spirit. Furthermore, it risked antagonizing the United States. This risk was heightened when, on 17 December, Washington again forwarded Castro's request for arbitration to the powers, this time with a strong endorsement.⁵⁶

If, on the other hand, Germany accepted arbitration, it could avoid an unseemly and undesirable schism with England and an unpleasant incident with the United States, and it could bargain hard to recoup all of its debts and claims against Castro. It was not the outcome Berlin had dreamt of, but it was the best possible outcome under the circumstances.

By choosing to deal with Roosevelt's alleged threat, and at the same time not dealing with German aims in Venezuela, some historians have given the impression that accepting arbitration was a stunning concession on Berlin's part. It is assumed that German aims were larger than the mere collection of debts, that by accepting arbitration the Germans were giving up more than the other powers, and therefore that they had to have a stronger reason to do so. Roosevelt himself was explicit about the breadth and danger of German aims: "Germany intended to seize some Venezuelan harbor and turn it into a strongly fortified place of arms . . . with a view to some measure of control over the future Isthmian Canal, and over South American affairs generally."⁵⁷

Every scholar who looks closely at the Venezuela crisis is familiar with the report of the British minister to Caracas that the German chargé, Gisbert von Pilgrim-Baltazzi, had visions of an intervention that would establish "something of a permanent administrative nature which will go far

55. Holleben to AA, 16 December 1902, with Bülow's marginalia no. 1, *GP* 17:264.

56. White to Hay, 17 and 18 December 1902, RG 59, M30:roll 193; White memorandum for Lansdowne, 17 December 1902, FO 80/442.

57. Roosevelt to Thayer, 21 August 1916, in Morison and Blum, eds., *Letters* 7:1102–3.

beyond the occupation of one or more Customs Houses, . . . [some intervention] as has taken place in Egypt.” Here, some argue, is the proof. Indeed, three separate reports of German naval captains confirm that in late 1901, Pilgrim-Baltazzi was dreaming of the establishment of German financial control over Venezuela. But so what? There is no evidence that Bülow or any other German official (and certainly not the kaiser) shared this dream. Further, given the evidence that does exist, this notion of German ulterior motives does not make sense.⁵⁸

Although the direct motivation for the intervention was clearly to collect debts, the claims per se were of little importance to the Reich. The kaiser blithely postponed the adventure for almost a year. Pressure on Castro should begin, he wrote, “only after the end of Heinrich’s trip, because whether the recovery of the sums happens a few weeks sooner or later doesn’t make any difference.”⁵⁹

It was what the claims represented, the insult to German prestige, that spurred Bülow to action. Significantly, the kaiser did not share his chancellor’s optimism about the low costs—material and diplomatic—of the adventure. It would strain both the naval budget, he feared, and good relations with the United States. Nor was Wilhelm excited about the potential benefits of intervention. Contrary to the popular image of him, the kaiser expressed no interest in seizing the opportunity to grab a base or coaling station in the region. Ambassador Metternich expressed the emperor’s thoughts well: “We are not interested in a couple more palm trees in the Tropics!”⁶⁰

Wilhelm only agreed to the operation after he was convinced that England would join as the senior partner in a hard and fast alliance. “I am very glad that His Majesty [Edward VII] is in agreement about our joint action in Venezuela,” he told the chancellor. Bülow responded dutifully, “Following the wishes of Your Majesty, I will take great care that we in the Wilhelmstrasse cooperate with England as long as possible.” Undersecretary Mühlberg considered the partnership the key to the emperor’s support. “It is not certain that Wilhelm II . . . would agree to the action against Venezuela without the participation of England,” he told Metternich.⁶¹

At this point, what had been for Bülow a means to persuade the

58. Haggard to Lansdowne, 21 September 1901, FO 80/427. See also Pilgrim-Baltazzi to Bülow, no. B.132, 27 September 1901, VZ1:18; and Commander of *Vineta* (de Fonseca-Volleim) to Admiralstab, 14 November 1901, enclosed in Admiralstab to Richthofen, no. B.4155II, 9 January 1902, commander of *Stein* (Bacher) to Admiralstab, 1 December 1901, enclosed in Admiralstab to Richthofen, no. B.4323II, 9 January 1902, and commander of *Moltke* (Frantz) to Admiralstab, 23 December, 1901, enclosed in Admiralstab to Richthofen, no. B.220.II, 29 January 1902, all in VZ1:19.

59. Wilhelm’s marginalia on Bülow to Wilhelm II, 20 January 1902, GP 17:241–43.

60. Metternich to Bülow, 9 November 1902, GP 17:115n.1.

61. Wilhelm II to Bülow, 12 November 1902, GP 17:116; Bülow to Wilhelm II, 13 November 1902, GP 17:118; Mühlberg to Metternich, no. IIIb. 8423, 17 July 1902, VZ1:21.

kaiser to agree to Germany's coercion of Venezuela became for the kaiser a means to a much more important end—the improvement of Germany's relationship with England. Yet as important as this goal was, it was not to be pursued at all costs. Musing about a worst-case scenario, Wilhelm calculated that the exercise could cost fifty to sixty million marks. "I am unable to say whether the aim justifies these expenses. In the difficult financial condition of the Reich, it would be very troublesome."⁶² And it was not worth irritating the United States. The fleet was not ready, and time was on Germany's side. The impetuous kaiser was, in this instance, a patient and cautious man. Although he was reassured by Roosevelt's words and actions, he nevertheless did everything he could to ensure that, if the United States did object, England would bear the brunt of its displeasure.

Was Germany testing the Monroe Doctrine? In a way, of course, by definition—but gingerly, hiding behind the big shoulders of the favored son. Testing, yes, but not provoking. The blockade of Venezuela was not the wily Germans' first step toward the conquest of South America. The empire was not to be built on the Venezuelan customs houses. The Reich sent only four ships and deferred to the English in the planning and execution of the operation. "Taking into account the American government, it is better for us not to be more severe than England, but rather to follow exactly the same line as Britain," Bülow wrote Wilhelm. "Yes," the kaiser answered laconically.⁶³

What of the kaiser's oft rabble-rousing marginalia? What of his "Bravo Panther!" and his "South America is our aim, old boy!" These are not insignificant; even if just passing rantings, they are the rantings of the kaiser. They set the tone of the court and the courtiers, including Bülow and the Wilhelmstrasse. They jangled the nerves. They kept the court on edge. They have power, these brief volcanic eruptions from the subconscious spilling into the stiff diplomatic record. And they are especially tortured here, in the Venezuela incident, when Mother England is involved.⁶⁴ But they did not determine policy. At the end of January, for example, Metternich wrote, "King Edward . . . expressed his desire to conclude [the Venezuelan incident] as soon as possible. It is more important, he said, to end the incident than to satisfy the demands of the two countries." The kaiser spewed: "The Serenissimus 'Most Peaceful' loses his nerve. Grand-mama [Queen Victoria] would never have said this." A compelling bit of raw passion—but what did Wilhelm do? He did exactly what the king

62. Wilhelm's marginalia on Bülow to Wilhelm II, 3 November 1902, *GP* 17:246–49.

63. Bülow to Wilhelm II, 23 January 1902, wi Wilhelm's marginalia, *GP* 17:275–76.

64. Vagts, *Deutschland*, 1497. For the impact of Wilhelm's personality on the court see John Röhl, "The Emperor's New Clothes: A Character Sketch of Kaiser Wilhelm II," in *Kaiser Wilhelm II: New Interpretations*, ed. John Röhl and Nicolaus Sombart (Cambridge, England, 1982), 23–62.

wanted. "We are firmly decided to hold together with England," Bülow cabled Metternich less than a week later.⁶⁵

Germany's acceptance of arbitration represented a shift in tactics but not in aims. It was seen as a way—the way—to maintain solidarity with England, to avoid provoking the United States, and to make the Venezuelans pay. It was neither a tremendous concession nor a miserable capitulation. Berlin's behavior in the months that followed the blockade showed that the Reich was far from cowed. At the Venezuela claims negotiations in Washington, the German representative was demanding, obstinate, and successful. When the Washington Protocols were signed on 13 February 1903, each of the three blockading powers received \$27,500, and the Germans were guaranteed \$340,000 more within three months. "Great Britain Apparently Outwitted" was the typical headline in the American press.⁶⁶ Furthermore, in Venezuelan waters, where the blockade remained in force for the duration of the Washington talks, the German navy shelled Fort San Carlos in the most aggressive and controversial operation of the entire intervention.

At San Carlos, the German gunboat *Panther* attempted to enter the lagoon of Maracaibo. It is not clear why: perhaps to seize the last remaining Venezuelan naval vessel, which was sheltering there, perhaps to better enforce the blockade, perhaps to take shelter. The Venezuelans alleged that the Germans' intent was aggressive and that the *Panther* fired the first shot.⁶⁷ The Germans maintained that the gunboat had been "surprised by lively fire from the fort of San Carlos." Unable to defend herself with her short-range cannon, the *Panther* retreated. Castro was jubilant. "Preparations for a victory celebration in Caracas are underway," the German commodore reported. "Therefore, I thought it necessary to teach them a lesson. . . . And so, I gave the order for the bombardment of San Carlos."⁶⁸

65. Metternich to AA, 28 January 1903, with Wilhelm's marginalia no. 1, *GP* 17:281–82; Bülow to Metternich, 4 February 1903, *GP* 17:286.

66. The *Washington Times*, 15 February 1903. The discrepancy in settlement awards was due to the fact that Germany's first-rank claims far surpassed Britain's. Also, England was eager to settle the affair before Parliament reconvened on 17 February. The details were hammered out at The Hague, where the negotiations dragged on until February 1904. By 1907, Venezuela had, to the surprise of most people, paid its debt in full. The best account of the claims negotiations is Wayne Guthrie, "The Anglo-German Intervention in Venezuela, 1902–3" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1983), 193–315.

67. For the Venezuelans' allegations see Russell to Hay, 23 and 28 January 1903, RG 59, M79:roll 56. For a recent restatement of this view see Rodríguez Campo, *Venezuela*, 225. Maracaibo, to the west of Caracas, was Gibraltar to the large, pendant-shaped lagoon. The waters were shallow and tidal, and treacherous to the large foreign blockading vessels, particularly after the Venezuelans had removed all buoys. See *Herald*, 18 December 1902. The last Venezuelan boat—which was the navy's finest—had eluded the Germans by entering the lagoon. See *New York Times*, 23 December 1902. (Fear of this simple tactic had prompted the British Admiralty to recommend strict secrecy for the operation.) Castro had ridiculed the blockade before the attack on Fort San Carlos, saying that Venezuela could break it at will as long as the allies did not control the lagoon. See *New York Times*, 26 January 1903.

68. Scheder, "Military Political Report: 14–24 January 1903," no. B.809II/GB.615, 24 January 1903, enclosed in Admiralstab to Richthofen, no. B.725II, 18 February 1903, Vz1:24;

The fort was flattened. The Wilhelmstrasse was unrepentant. "No American or English admiral would have behaved differently," State Secretary Oswald von Richthofen asserted.⁶⁹ Be that as it may, it was a public relations disaster. The Wilhelmstrasse had hoped to mend the alliance and reassure the ever-edgy Americans with its acceptance of arbitration and its clear deference to England. It was not enough. German obstinacy was what was noticed and remembered.

The Venezuela story had moved to the back pages of the American press, but the German "attack upon a mud fort and a collection of naked fishermen," as the *Nation* described the bombing of Fort San Carlos, rekindled the anti-German flames in all their fury. The German chargé summed up the situation accurately when he wrote to Bülow, "At no moment since the beginning of the operation has the mood in the press been so excited against us."⁷⁰ Even though the Germans cleared their policy with the Americans, deferred to the British, and accepted arbitration, they were seen as aggressors. The sinking of the two Venezuelan ships, the shelling of Fort San Carlos (not Puerto Cabello, which was forgotten), and the "foot-dragging" on accepting arbitration confirmed the image. The Germans had no margin for error.

The Venezuela crisis clarified the balance of power in the Caribbean. Ever since England had deferred to the United States in 1895 and the Americans had ousted the Spanish in 1898, the rules of the game in the Caribbean had been unclear. The powers—and the powerless (the countries of Central America and the Caribbean)—were groping to determine what was and was not permissible in the region. England had renounced its potential claim, but how thoroughly? Germany was hungry and powerful, but how much would the Reich risk for the prizes Latin America could offer? And where would the swing vote—the British navy—go? The United States had laid claim to the region, but it was difficult to evaluate the strength of the claim. In 1823 the Monroe Doctrine had been blithely arrogant rhetoric, but by 1902 the United States had staked out Cuba and Puerto Rico, and its navy was substantial and growing. Furthermore, geography (not proximity but the happy absence of powerful neighbors) smiled on American preeminence in the region. Germany would soon be tied down in conflict on the Continent. Nevertheless, in 1902, the United States did not yet have the raw power—military, economic, or diplomatic—to enforce the Monroe Doctrine, and it was not clear how much relative or intangible power it had.

This uncertainty led Theodore Roosevelt to give the wrong signal to the Europeans before the Venezuela crisis. He had thought that their forcibly

Scheder, "Military Political Report, 16–26 December 1902," 26 December 1902, enclosed in Schröder to Richthofen, no. B.254II, Vz1:23.

69. Richthofen to Quadt, no. 14, 24 January 1903, Vz1:23.

70. The *Nation*, 29 January 1903, 81; Quadt to AA, 23 January 1903, GP 17:274.

collecting debts in the hemisphere would help keep the irksome republics in line, but during the crisis he realized that debt collection could arouse the U.S. public and lead to complications that the United States could not yet control. Like Acheson and Korea, Baker and Kuwait, Roosevelt defined the national interest only to realize that, as soon as the crisis broke, his definition had been wrong.

Thus, the European powers were essentially in the dark about U.S. policy; they had to guess how the Americans would react to any action they took in the region. In one way, their situation during the Venezuela crisis was similar to the one they would face a decade later during the first year of Woodrow Wilson's presidency, when American policy toward Mexico was a mystery. Yet in an important way, it was entirely different. Wilson was presumptuous; he was arrogant. He had the power to call the shots in Mexico—and he knew it—and the Europeans would have to await his pleasure.⁷¹ Roosevelt, on the other hand, was uncertain—of England's stance in the region, of Germany's will, and of America's power.

In Venezuela, Berlin had hoped that a little cooperative gunboat diplomacy would forge a significant bond with England, as though the English would not notice the threat posed by the burgeoning navy across the channel. And the kaiser had hoped that the formal notification of plans and the deference to England and the small number of German ships involved in the blockade would reassure Washington. But the Americans were far from comforted; they saw in Venezuela proof of German aggressiveness, impulsiveness, scheming, and unreliability.

The gap between the timidity of German actions and the American perception of them characterizes not just the Venezuela incident but all German activity in the hemisphere before World War I. Whether in its pursuit of bases in Latin America, or informal colonies or economic influence, Berlin was hesitant, and Washington saw it as aggressive.⁷²

What did Germany actually do to establish hegemony in the region? The simple answer is nothing. Why then did the United States persist in seeing Germany as the threat to the region? In part, because paranoia always contains a kernel of truth, and the truth is that Germany could have threatened the United States in the Caribbean. By both American and German reckoning, Germany would have won a naval war waged in the region. And even if it was far-fetched to imagine that Germany might provoke such a war, it is the business of strategists to imagine the worst.

Furthermore, there was a compelling logic to the idea of German expan-

71. For Wilson in Mexico in 1913 see Thomas Baecker, *Die deutsche Mexikopolitik, 1913/1914* [German policy toward Mexico, 1913–1914] (Berlin, 1971), 32ff; Peter Calvert, *The Mexican Revolution, 1910–1914* (Cambridge, 1968), 167–284; Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution* (Chicago, 1981), 156–202; Arthur Link, *The New Freedom* (Princeton, 1956), 347–77; and Mitchell, “Dreams,” 249–314.

72. See Mitchell, “Dreams.”

sion in the hemisphere. The keynote of the day was expand or perish. Germany was considered overpopulated and in need of overseas markets. Africa and China were already carved up by continental powers with whom Germany did not want to clash. Many Americans feared that Latin America was the Reich's logical choice.

Moreover, German policy was deeply ambivalent. German actions in Latin America were indeed cautious, but this caution obscured neither the rapid and alarming growth of the navy nor the kaiser's provocative rhetoric. Nor did it convince the Americans that the Reich did not harbor sinister designs on the region. Wilhelm and his courtiers refused to make the hard choices that clear policy requires. They were cautious, but refused to be humble; they bowed to the Monroe Doctrine, but refused to recognize it. They were cautious, but in a prickly, begrudging way. Thus they failed to reap any of the benefits of caution—trust and friendship—and they ended up with the worst of both worlds. They got nothing but distrust.

German policy was naïve. Germany failed to understand how threatening the growth of its fleet and of its industrial power were. This reality could not be wished away with tactics and flattery. Both the Americans and the British—press and politicians—profoundly distrusted the Germans. If England wanted to maintain friendly relations with the Americans, it could not enter any alliance, however temporary, however practical, with the Germans in the Western Hemisphere.⁷³

American policy was also naïve. The United States failed to understand how privileged its position in the hemisphere was. The Spanish-American War had given Washington a new and unfamiliar coat; it took a while to get accustomed to it. During the Venezuela blockade, Roosevelt realized that the United States neither needed nor wanted European help in its backyard. He announced the Roosevelt Corollary the next year. Yet the Venezuela crisis did not merely put more swagger in the American step. It simultaneously led to increased anxiety. The prize was great, it was within reach, and it could be snatched away.

It was not groundless in 1902 to perceive a German threat, but after the Venezuela crisis the Americans should have breathed easier: English friendship and German timidity had been confirmed. And Roosevelt did gain confidence, taking Panama and quelling disturbances in the Dominican Republic with newfound assurance. But at the same time many Americans also felt heightened anxiety, which soon hardened into paranoia. Fear of German aggression in the hemisphere lingered long after it was reasonable. A year after the Venezuela crisis, the idea of a German threat should have faded, not because of the new assertiveness of Washington but because of the increasing isolation of Germany in Europe. The General Board of the U.S. Navy implicitly recognized this, dropping its interest in war planning

⁷³. See Herbert to Lansdowne, 25 February 1903, FO 420/214.

against Germany in 1903.⁷⁴ But the image persisted, and it was resuscitated with a vengeance during the Wilson administration.

It was an image that may have spurred the Roosevelt administration to seize its prize more quickly than it might otherwise have done. It did not, however, determine U.S. actions. These actions—the taking of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Panama, Haiti, and the Virgin Islands and the interventions in the Dominican Republic and throughout Central America—were the clear and simple assertion of hegemony. The United States was not the smug protector of the status quo in the Caribbean. It, like Germany, was a fledgling imperial power, and the Caribbean at the turn of the century was the arena in which the two potential rivals were sizing each other up, eyeing each other suspiciously, full of bravado and fear.

74. For the earliest U.S. war plan against Germany see "War with Germany," (1897, no. 266), RG 8, UNOpP, box 47. For the General Board's discussions of war with Germany see 22–24 November 1900, 20–21 March 1901, 23 and 25 April 1901, 22–23 May 1901, 25–26 June 1901, 21–22 and 24 August 1901, 19–20 December 1901, Meetings of the General Board, Minutes of Proceedings, RG 80. For the navy's war plan against Germany see War Portfolio No. 1, box 1, War Portfolios of the General Board, RG 80. On the date of the plan see Mitchell, "Dreams," 28–34.