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A NEEDLESS CONFLICT:
The Arrow War Between China and Britain 1856-60

The ostensible cause of the Arrow War appears trivial: In order to arrest some men charged with piracy, a small Chinese-owned, Chinese-crewed 100 ton ship flying the British flag was boarded. Most of its crew was seized and its flag pulled down. But this minor incident ultimately unleashed a significant war between two empires, the British and the Chinese. Since a fairly trivial offense caused such an uproar, the real causes of the war lay elsewhere: in British and Chinese desires to maintain national credibility, bullheaded British diplomats who refused to give an inch and who possessed older grievances unresolved by the prior Anglo-Chinese conflict, and the Chinese sense of superiority and ethnocentrism, who refused to let "the outer barbarians" have ambassadors resident in the capital of Peking. Ultimately humbling the Chinese and their emperor, the Arrow War was a product of mutual misunderstandings, rival ethnocentrisms, and a bilateral game of "chicken" aiming to avoid "losing face."

The Irish captain, a mere man aged 21 named Thomas Kennedy, complained about his treatment to the local British consul, Harry Parkes. Parkes, the local consul, fluent in Chinese, demanded not only the return of the prisoners, but an apology from Yeh Ming-Chen, the Viceroy of Kwangsi and Kwangtung provinces. Yeh offered to return nine of the twelve men taken from the lorcha, but Parkes judged this unacceptable: If the Chinese could seize British ships because their crews had allegedly violated Chinese law, no British shipping would be safe around Canton. Furthermore, they had insulted the British flag on the ship by pulling it down during the arrest. Parkes then referred to this case to John Bowring, the governor of Hong Kong. He had been looking for a pretext to reopen a long simmering dispute with Yeh.

been looking for a pretext to reopen a long simmering dispute with Yeh. European entry into the city of Canton had been allowed under the Treaty of Nanking that ended the Opium War (1840-42), but Yeh had denied the Europeans this treaty right. He humiliated the "Outer Barbarians" by continuing the tradition of confining them to a narrow strip along the waterfront outside the city's walls. After Bowring issued a threat demanding the 12 men and an apology, the British seized a junk when Yeh didn't comply. Yeh then offered to surrender the 12 men and not to seize lorchas under the British flag in the future, but he wouldn't apologize or return the prisoners publicly. Judging these concessions as not being enough, Bowring authorized Rear Admiral Michael Seymour to attack, who proceeded to capture four barrier forts five miles south of Canton. The war had begun. Bowring issued the further demand that Yeh should allow foreign representatives to meet with Chinese authorities in Canton itself, which was allowed under the Treaty of Nanking. Since the British controlled the sea and water-borne approach to Canton, but lacked the troops to take the city, a stalemate lasting some months resulted.

By early January 1856, the news had filtered back to London: England had a major war on its hands in China. Lord Palmerston, the prime minister, popular with the English masses for standing up against foreigners for English rights abroad, opted to back Bowring's actions. Although Bowring wasn't considered a man possessed of much tact or good judgment, the prime minister's government decided that not to support Bowring would damage England's future credibility in its foreign dealings in East Asia. But the insult to the British flag committed by seizing the ship and pulling down the flag was good enough reason for a war, he believed.

By doing this, Palmerston put his job on the line. The Tory Party in

opposition, led by Lord Derby, both had traditionally disliked the expense of foreign wars, foreign colonies, and foreign commitments abroad, and (naturally) it wanted back control of the House of Commons. Others also opposed the war, such as the radicals of Palmerston's own party, led by Richard Cobden and John Bright, the ex-prime minister Lord John Russell, and the Peelites. A leading member of the latter group and a man destined to be prime minister four times, William Gladstone gave a powerful speech condemning getting involved in the war, illustrating how he was a consistent critic of imperial expansionism during his long career. Although the House of Lords backed the government's decision to wage war against China, 146 to 110, the House of Commons didn't, balloting 263 to 247 against the prime minister's decision. The government fell, Parliament was dissolved, and a general election ensued. The issue was taken to the country, and the electorate voted for a hard line abroad, resoundingly returning Palmerston to office. The previous House of Commons proved to be less imperialist than the voters.

Restored back to power in early 1857, Palmerston dispatched the Earl of Elgin as a special representative to deal with China, along with ships and troops. Angered by the execution of a missionary deep inside China, the French joined in the expedition by doing likewise. The Indian Mutiny of 1857 waylaid the British forces, for Elgin, at the request of Lord Canning, diverted his forces to India to help rescue the British position there.

Sufficient British forces to attack Canton didn't arrive until the December of 1857. Elgin requested from Yeh compensation for the British losses in the war to date, and the enforcement of the Treaty of Nanking's provisions that gave foreigners the right of free entry into Canton. After Yeh rejected the British demands, the British attacked Canton although

outnumbered over five to one, and easily took it. Yeh's lead assistant, Pih-Kuei, was put in charge of Canton during its occupation, his decrees being subject to a board of three Chinese-speaking French and British officials. Elgin then went to Shanghai to meet with the emperor's representatives. But Peking refused to negotiate directly with him, telling him (like previous European diplomats) to deal with Yeh's successor as the Viceroy of the two Kwangs.

As a result, Elgin and Baron Gros, the French representative, went north to Taku to negotiate, where they were prevented from going up the Peiho River to Tientsin by the Taku forts. For some weeks in the spring of 1858, desultory diplomatic negotiations continued with the Chinese representative, for Tau, the governor of Chihli province, didn't have full powers from the emperor to do so. The main sticking point was the Chinese refusal to allow western diplomats to live in Peking, since the Chinese then would have to recognize the European powers as equals and no longer as "Outer Barbarians." This would require a massive change in their traditional outlook in international relations. After enough ships had arrived and the negotiations hadn't gone anywhere, the British and French attacked and easily took the forts at Taku. The allied fleet then sailed up to Tientsin. Finally using the threat of the British army marching on Peking, Elgin and his negotiating team extracted concessions out of the Chinese in a manner even the French thought overbearing. The basic terms the Treaty of Tientsin included opening up ten new ports, allowing foreigners to travel into the interior freely, and authorizing Western diplomats to live as residents in Peking. Since Elgin didn't want to humble the emperor so much that might cause him to lose control over China, he agreed to not actually <u>exercise</u> the right for his country's

ambassadors to live in Peking. This proved to be a major mistake.

Frederick Bruce, Elgin's brother, was sent out from Britain to formally ratify the Treaty of Tientsin in Peking. In the June of 1859, because he insisted on traveling up by the traditional route, via the Peiho River to Tientsin and then overland to Peking, his forces got fired upon and defeated by the reinforced Taku forts. He had refused the Chinese offer to travel overland to Peking via the city of Pehtang, which would save the Chinese face at some cost to his own, since it the sight of Western gunboats pulling into Tientsin once again would be too humbling.

As a result, the British government sent out another fleet and army under Elgin to force its way to Peking in order to get the treaty ratified. Elgin's action in not insisting on actually having a foreign ambassador resident in China was blamed for helping encourage the Chinese to think the western powers would forget what had been agreed to in the Treaty of Tientsin. After successfully taking the Taku forts and sailing up to Tientsin once again in the August and September of 1860, Elgin, Gros, and Parkes negotiated with the Chinese diplomat Kuei Liang. They insisted on gaining an apology for Bruce's being attacked, an indemnity, the Treaty of Tientsin being ratified, and permission to advance their army to a town right near the capital. But while the allied force moved towards Peking, the Chinese army maneuvered in a threatening manner, causing a battle in which the French and British defeated the Chinese. The emperor now chose this time to leave Peking for the north, which then surrendered to the allied army. During this time, prisoners, including Parkes, were taken. Some of them were killed. In retaliation Elgin decided to permanently humble the emperor by burning the already looted Summer Palace. Even the French objected to this, but they were overruled. Finally,

really ending the war, Prince Kung, the brother of the emperor, and Elgin signed the Treaty of Tientsin on October 24, 1860 in Peking.

Importantly, the main cause of the Arrow War lay in mutual attempts to save face and a dual case of ethnocentrism, which sought to protect one nation's pride and/or to humble the other's. Chinese opposition to allowing Western ambassadors to live as residents in China, Palmerston's insistence on backing Bowring because the flag had been insulted, Yeh's refusal to allow the "barbarians" to move freely in Canton, Bowring's insistence on an apology for the taking of the Arrow and for the public return of the prisoners, and Parkes' refusal to accept just nine prisoners back, were all rooted in a desire to preserve national pride and protect against future outrages by the other side through upholding national credibility. Each side sought to get what it could by opportunely trying to extract concessions whenever possible, such as Yeh refusing to let westerners enter Canton despite the provisions of the Treaty of Nanking, and Bowring seizing upon the Arrow incident to reopen the same issue. Both sides sought to humiliate the other, such as denying Western diplomats the right to speak directly with Peking and the burning of the emperor's palace by Elgin. While negotiating with Elgin and Gros, Tau in his letters even raised the character referring to the Chinese emperor above those referring to Queen Victoria and Emperor Napoleon III. Acts of weakness, such as Elgin initially being willing to not actually exercise the British right to have an ambassador resident in the capital, were seen as being an excuse to try to take back what had earlier been conceded. The hopes of mankind for peace won't improve until nations' leaders learn to act better than the kind of power struggle that operates continually between parents and children, or teachers and children, in which minor concessions by the former are interpreted as weakness by the latter, and a pretext to trying to get still more, requiring the former to uphold a hardline that concedes nothing.