



Chester Alan Arthur: The forgotten American President who Changed the World through two Conferences (the International Meridian Conference of 1884 and the Berlin Africa Conference of 1884–1885)

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ABSTRACT

Chester Alan Arthur was the twentieth-first president of the United States. His presidency, from 1881–1885, was unplanned and monumental, yet he is an often overlooked figure of history. When he is remembered, it is for domestic reform. Here his part on the international stage, through the events of the International Prime Meridian Conference in 1884 in Washington DC, an early success for international relations, and his part in the Berlin West Africa Conference of 1884–1885, through recognizing the Congo flag, are explored. How his character influenced his role, how it contrasted with Belgian King Leopold II, and Arthur’s place in civil rights history is also examined, as well as the developing imperialism and Anglo-American order of the world.

KEYWORDS

International Prime Meridian Conference; Berlin West Africa Conference; American leadership; imperialism; international relations history; American Civil War and Reconstruction

INTRODUCTION

When asked to name an American president, the historical heavyweights George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), or the more recent Barack Obama, Donald Trump, or Joe Biden may come to mind. Ask someone to name any president, and even within the United States, the chances that they will name Chester Alan Arthur are remarkably low. In fact, *Time Magazine* listed him in an article entitled, “Top 10 Forgettable Presidents”.² President Arthur, despite his lack of memorability, made consequential changes within the United States and the world at large. Chief among these was his invitation to the nations of the world in 1884 for the International Meridian Conference, which formalized international agreement of Greenwich as the zero or prime meridian for cartography and established univer-

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2 “Top 10 Forgettable Presidents.” Time. Time Inc., March 10, 2009. http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1879648_1879646_1879694,00.html.



sal time. In addition, it was an early success for diplomatic conference and international relations, foreshadowing President Woodrow Wilson's involvement with the League of Nations after World War One and the founding of the United Nations in New York City following World War Two.

President Arthur also had interesting ties to civil rights. These ties included a case that he took as a lawyer and then later in a judge that he appointed as president. When Arthur is remembered, it is for his work in combatting cronyism. He changed the ethics behind governmental actions through the Pendleton Act. The Statue of Liberty, the centenary of the end of the American Revolution, and more occurred during Arthur's presidency. At the end of his presidency, the Berlin West Africa Conference took place. The American ambassador to Belgium provided interesting links between Leopold II of Belgium and Chester Arthur himself. The Berlin Conference, on the heels of the International Meridian Conference, forever changed Africa and the wider world. Curiously, nowhere on the official White House Historical Association website are these two monumental conferences listed on Chester Arthur's biography page.³

The United States broadly, and Arthur specifically, impacted the history of the African continent via two prominent conferences in the years 1884 and 1885. While the Berlin Conference is the most direct influence over the African continent, the Meridian Conference is an important precedent in establishing Anglo-American influence on the world. This article attempts to trace the role of President Arthur on the international stage, particularly through two pivotal conferences: the Meridian Conference and the Berlin Conference. Peaceful international consensus and ease and fairness of trade were important underpinnings of these Conferences, particularly from the viewpoint of President Arthur, and American ideals often contrasted with European imperialism during this time. This article constructs a historical narrative and provides analysis by consulting both primary and secondary sources. It is divided into several key areas: The Prime Meridian Conference of 1884; The Man Behind the Presidency; The Legacy of the International Meridian Conference; The United States, Anglo-Saxon Ideals, and Nineteenth-Century Imperialism; The Berlin Conference; Opposition at Home and Abroad; and Conclusion

THE PRIME MERIDIAN CONFERENCE OF 1884

In 1884, two major map systems were in place: the British system with zero longitude placed at Greenwich and the French system with zero longitude running through Paris. As steel tracks were laid across the lands and telegraph wires connected towns, a system of lines, a unified system for the world, was recognized as being important. At the invitation of American President Chester A. Arthur, the countries of the world were invited to assemble and determine where that meridian would be placed. Never elected as president, President Arthur came to power when President Garfield was assassinated in a train station and now trains were paving the way for a presidential decree. For centuries, sailors had looked to the sky to navigate by the stars. In 1884,

3 Information on the conferences' exclusion on the website is accurate as of April 13, 2022.



the titans of industry and of science, the stars of their age, were turning the eyes of the navigators toward a new North Star; it was to be zero degrees running through Greenwich: the single and unified Prime Meridian.

European expansion and conquest, which came to such height during the Renaissance, required that new lands be mapped. Cartography became a foundation stone of the Renaissance and the “Age of Exploration”. In the nineteenth century, maps were still needed to recognize new lands and new boundaries as European empires and the spreading countries of the United States of America and Canada extended their territories. 1884 stood at the height of the emergent expanding capitalism of Great Britain and the less-modernized systems of the other nations. Land ownership had been clear, but now maritime power and greater global connectivity required an examination of this maritime sovereignty.

By the 1880s, the expanding world was also shrinking thanks to the rise of telegraph wires and railroads. Confusion grew as a world that had once functioned with differing systems was brought closer together. Sanford Fleming, a representative at the International Meridian Conference of 1884, wrote, “The mode of notation followed by common usage for time immemorial, whatever its applicability to limited areas, when extended to a vast continent, with a network of lines of railway and telegraph, has led to confusion and created many difficulties. Further, it is insufficient for the purposes of scientific investigation, so marked a feature of modern inquiry.”⁴ The maps of the world had become a Tower of Babel and with progress advancing, it was decided that there should be only one language of longitude spoken. That is, it was recognized that there must be one single and undisputed origin: one Prime Meridian.

THE MAN BEHIND THE PRESIDENCY

Chester A. Arthur, the twenty-first president of the United States, who served from 1881–1885, never campaigned to be president and yet emerged as a steady hand for American democracy and a powerful force for change on the international front. It was at President Arthur’s invitation that the nations of the world gathered in Washington to attend the International Meridian Conference beginning on October 1, 1884. The issue was on his mind long before the nations assembled. In various speeches to the House of Representatives and to the Senate, he urged them to address the safety of the seas and informed them of his intention to engage the other countries in correspondence to determine if they were interested in assembling for a Conference. Here are his words from his second State of the Union Address, on December 4, 1882.

I renew my recommendation of such legislation as will place the United States in harmony with other maritime powers with respect to the international rules for the prevention of collisions at sea. In conformity with your joint resolution of the 3rd of August last, I have directed the Secretary of State to address foreign Governments in respect to a proposed conference for considering the subject of

⁴ Recommendations Suggested by Sanford Fleming, October 1884, Microfiche reproduced in online archives available at https://archive.org/details/cihm_03131.

the universal adoption of a common prime meridian to be used in the reckoning of longitude and in the regulation of time throughout the civilized world.⁵

This address was delivered to the Senate and House of Representatives nearly two years before the nations assembled.

To better understand the first American president who initiated the assembling of the nations on American soil, sixty-one years before the establishment of the United Nations, it is interesting to look at the biographical details of the man. President Arthur, unlike his more contemporary counterparts of recent years, was shy and private in his dealings. Unfortunately, for the sake of history and research, many of his papers were burned. What does remain are his official dealings and sketches of his character from his days on the campaign trail, not for president but vice-president. He was the running mate in the 1880 election of James A. Garfield. Despite both candidates in the 1880 election, Winfield Hancock for the Democrats and James Garfield for the Republicans, carrying nineteen states, the Republican ticket won the election with an electoral vote of 214 to 155.

After only six months in office, an assassin's bullet cut through Garfield's presidency and Arthur became president. There are two ironic coincidences connected to the assassination. Firstly, the last president to be assassinated before Garfield (also, the first) was Abraham Lincoln, sixteen years earlier. All three men, Lincoln, Garfield, and Arthur were connected with the Union Army during the Civil War. Lincoln's son, Robert Todd Lincoln, was with Garfield during the assassination. Their assassins had nothing to do with each other, though, aside from being disgruntled. John Wilkes Booth was a southerner, upset with Lincoln over the Civil War, while Garfield's assassin, Charles J. Guiteau, was upset over not being rewarded a federal job.

The second coincidence is somewhat more abstract, but it is interesting to the circumstances surrounding the International Meridian Conference. Garfield was at the train station when he was assassinated, making Arthur president, and trains were a driving force in the Meridian Conference. The official White House website states that, "Publisher Alexander K. McClure recalled, 'No man ever entered the Presidency so profoundly and widely distrusted, and no one ever retired ... more generally respected.'"⁶ His tenuous beginning in the public eyes was not a fault or grievance of Arthur's past or own doing, but rather was a result of the public opinion of his party at the times. The Gilded Age, especially in New York, was marked by scandal and corruption. That Arthur came from New York at such a time was reason for the public to be wary of his presidency, but Arthur was his own man and became his own president. In the words of his eulogy in 1886, a mere two years after the Meridian Conference, he was remembered for his presidential leadership: "General Arthur took up the reins of public authority. From the hour that he felt the obligations of the high duties thus forced upon him he seemed by a sudden and natural aptitude to be filled with power to execute them. From that moment he made it evident to all that

5 Second Annual Message (State of the Union Address) by President Arthur, 4 December 1882, Provided by Miller Center of University of Virginia.

6 *White House. Gov Chester A. Arthur Biography*, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/chesterarthur>.



he knew what he ought to do, what he wanted to do, and how to do it. He was every inch a President.”⁷

In another of those quirks of history, Arthur’s father was a minister for the state of New York. One of the towns that he preached for was aptly named, for the role that his son would play in the future Meridian Conference: Greenwich. Arthur’s presidency was grounded in realism, rather than coincidence though. Deeply influenced by the disgruntled assassin, Charles J. Guiteau, who was upset at having been denied a federal job when he shot Garfield, Arthur turned his attention to a decades-long problem. Documents.Gov explains this problem well, “Although President George Washington made most of his Federal appointments based on merit, subsequent Presidents began to deviate from this policy. By the time Andrew Jackson was elected President in 1828, the ‘spoils system,’ in which political friends and supporters were rewarded with Government positions, was in full force.”⁸ The effect of this for Arthur was signing into legislation the Pendleton Civil Service Act of 1883 that determined that federal jobs would be merit-based only and free of the corruption that had encircled them.

The Pendleton Act placed President Arthur in the spotlight. During the campaign in 1880, though, Arthur was characterized as shy and reluctant when there was the suggestion that he would be hoisted onto the backs of supporters, “His face took on a look of perplexity; then he blushed, and, turning to a friend, begged that they might do no such thing, and they desisted.”⁹ This then, quiet, shy, reluctant, is the man who made the bold move to assemble the nations of the world. Perhaps, it also explained why many of his personal papers were destroyed.

It is also important to note that Arthur was not the erstwhile, young candidate hoping to gain personal favor. Indeed, in the Biographical Sketches campaign pamphlet of 1880, he was characterized as following the will of the people, but in a noble and fitting way, “He is an intelligent, penetrating, judicious leader, and he would make his party the strong right arm of the popular will” and “He has been justly described as an illustration of the gentleman in politics. A lawyer of high standard, student of broad and varied culture, his wide reading instant at his command, of fine presence, with rare social gifts and possessing the aptitude which meets any demand, without an enemy in the world, equally ready in a story or a quotation, and as much at home in the library as in the committee-room, genial, chivalrous, and popular.”¹⁰ Without an enemy in the world seems an only all too appropriate designation for a man who invited the world to assemble.

He was also religiously scrupulous and morally upright. By the time he was president, he had already stood in the powerful position of Union general and, in

7 Proceedings of the Senate and Assembly of State of New York in relation to the death of Chester A. Arthur held at the Capitol, April 20, 1887, available at <https://archive.org/details/proceedingsofsen00newy/page/n9/mode/2up>.

8 Our Documents.Gov The Pendleton Act, available at <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=48>.

9 Biographical Sketches of General James A. Garfield and General Chester A. Arthur, available at <https://archive.org/details/biographicalsket00nevi/page/n5/mode/2up>.

10 Biographical Sketches.



relation to the bankroll that he might have accumulated had he wished to from contracts, this telling information is recorded in the Biographical Sketches, "Speaking of him at this period, a friend says: 'So jealous was he of his integrity that I have known instances where he could have made thousands of dollars legitimately, and yet refused to do it on the ground that he was a public officer and meant to be like Caesar's wife,' above suspicion."¹¹ Such strong conviction must have been refreshing for a federal government, and a New York politician in particular, where scandal and payoffs had become commonplace. No wonder the Pendleton Civil Service Act was of such importance to Arthur. Lest it is suggested that Arthur was entirely innocent, it is worth noting that although Arthur himself did not financially profit from political insider dealings, he did reward political help with government positions that funneled into more financial support for the Republican party, while he was customs collector for the Port of New York, under Ulysses S. Grant's presidency in the 1870s. Rutherford Hayes ejected Arthur from the job in 1878, in an effort to stop the system.¹²

As a public servant, he zealously protected the holdings of the United States' citizens, allowing them to bloom into profitable ventures. Already a widower, as of 1880, President Arthur was an older, more contemplative type of president. That is in no way to suggest that he was not progressive, though, and the same morally upright lawyer, chronicled in the Biographical Sketches, and the same successful general, was also a commanding presence at the helm of the financial enterprise of the United States. Some were disappointed that he did not address the debt accumulated during the Civil War, but it is true that he was wholeheartedly committed to the protection of capital through transportation.

Much of the financial status, championed by the Republican party, was tied to the railways and in the build-up to the 1880 campaign it is recorded that, "Under its administration railways have increased from 31,000 miles in 1860 to more than 82,000 miles in 1879. Our foreign trade has increased from \$700,000,000 to \$1,150,000,000 in the same time, and our exports, which were \$20,000,000 less than our imports in 1860, were \$264,000,000 more than our imports in 1879."¹³ It is therefore justifiably argued then that Arthur was not taking a radical step in inviting the nations to assemble. Rather, he was protecting the interests of his country and by belief and extension, those of the betterment of the world. As an impromptu president, he was carrying on the business of his party, recognizing the challenges of the time, and seeking to advance the cause of the meridian. Murdin stated that, "In the United States in 1883, there were 49 separate railway operating time systems. Additionally, submarine telegraph cables made coordination necessary across oceans."¹⁴ It was no longer acceptable or convenient for different systems to be used. Standardization was coupled with mechanization in this epoch.

11 Biographical Sketches.

12 Chester A. Arthur, History.com available at <https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/chester-a-arthur>.

13 Biographical Sketches.

14 P. MURDIN, *Full Meridian of Glory Perilous Adventures in the Competition to Measure the Earth*, New York 2009, p. 135.



In mid-October 1884, while the delegates were in Washington for the Conference, they met with President Arthur at a reception and these were his remarks to those gathered,

I am pleased to meet here so many delegates, coming from so many and such important countries. The almost unanimous response of the nations of Europe, Asia and America to the invitation extended to them by this Government, and the high character of the delegates, shows that the present conference is a recognition of a widely felt need and an attempt to reach a solution acceptable to all. You have already made such great progress toward this desired end by adopting a common meridian zero from which all peoples may reckon longitude eastward and westward, and by agreeing that a universal day should be chosen for the convenience of the world... The opportunity which this conference has afforded to bring together for one friendly purpose representatives of widely separated peoples cannot but increase the spirit of good-will and cooperation which should exist between them.¹⁵

Clearly, the international character of the Meridian Conference and the emphasis that it was for the betterment of the world were foremost in President Arthur's mind. Certainly, that he was a Republican president in the aftermath of the American Civil War, when reconciliation with the returned southern separatists of the Confederacy, colored his political efforts at cooperation. It may even illustrate why Arthur's critics were disappointed in him not going further to federalize civil rights issues in the United States. Despite that, the character of the man, devoted to the wellbeing of others, even when they were minorities, or disparate nations was an important underpinning of his presidency. This dovetailed with his experience in trade and finance, from quartermaster in the Union Army during the Civil War for the state of New York to Republican politician, and thereby industrialized business champion. Conferences that highlighted trade were thus of interest to him.

Seeing the humanity in his opposition was also no alien concept to Arthur. His wife, Ellen Herndon, whom he married in 1859, was from Virginia, a state that became part of the Confederacy. Also, some former Confederates had fought because of their geographic location rather than ideas about people. Emory Speer had been a formal Confederate soldier and was appointed first as an attorney in Georgia in 1883 by President Arthur and then in 1885, President Arthur appointed him as a federal judge in Georgia where he served until 1918. In both positions, Speer fought for civil rights, upholding voting rights, and fighting against oppressive labor policies. Speer's rulings did not always prove popular with white voters, but Speer's appointments were another cornerstone in Chester Arthur's plight in the civil rights arena.¹⁶

15 October 17, 1884 *The New York Times*, available at <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/browser>.

16 T. HUEBNER, "Emory Speer," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, July 15, 2021, <https://nge-staging-wp.galileo.usg.edu/articles/government-politics/emory-speer-1848-1918/>.

THE LEGACY OF THE INTERNATIONAL MERIDIAN CONFERENCE



A month after the Conference ended, it was clear that those driving ideas of progress that had warranted it were still very much on the president's mind. In his speech on December 16, 1884, at The World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, Arthur said, "Railroads, telegraph lines, and submarine cables have drawn much nearer the nations of the earth, and an assembly like this of the representatives of different nations is promotive of good-will and peace, while it advances the material welfare of all. The United States extend, to those from foreign countries who visit us on this occasion, a cordial welcome."¹⁷

The United States government, although separate from the Meridian Conference, was at all times involved in the proceedings. That is to say, it was by Congressional authority that President Arthur invited the nations to assemble. The invitation was authorized by the Secretary of State, the same office that asks for the safe passage of American citizens in their passports today. That is, in a time when there were many immigrants, but few American travelers abroad, American diplomacy was asked to have safe passage into the nations of the world, particularly Europe. Moreover, the United States invited the nations to come onto the American shore. At the end of the Conference, the Congress and Senate were kept abreast of the results.

The Meridian Conference's success was thus not merely their own, but also the triumph of the American government. For multiple years, President Arthur spoke of the idea of the Conference and then the authorization of the Conference in his State of the Union address. It was an achievement of President Arthur in foreign policy, that the United States brought together the nations in peaceful means and diplomatic success. It also anticipated, in historical foreshadowing, the United Nations headquarters in New York City, when the United Nations began in 1945. The land in New York City where the headquarters are is, however, international land rather than American. It is interesting to note that the United States did not join the League of Nations after World War One in 1920, which had significantly less success. This is not to imply that American leadership is required for international success, but it is worth noting that the Washington Conference of 1884 and the United Nations both relied on democratic principles, delegates assembled from many nations, and they each took place in the United States.

In his State of the Union address, addressing the House of Representatives and the Senate, on December 1, 1884, President Arthur gave a succinct summary of the events of the preceding months of the Conference: "The International Meridian Conference lately convened in Washington upon the invitation of the Government of the United States... concluded its labors on the 1st of November, having with substantial unanimity agreed upon the meridian of Greenwich as the starting point whence longitude is to be computed through 180 degrees eastward and westward, and upon the adoption, for all purposes for which it may be found convenient, of a universal

17 December 16, 1884 at The World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents: Chester A. Arthur September 19, 1881 to March 4, 1885, Provided by Project Gutenberg.



day which shall begin at midnight on the initial meridian and whose hours shall be counted from zero up to twenty-four.”¹⁸

The lasting legacy of the International Meridian Conference was the formal establishment of the zero meridian through Greenwich as the Prime Meridian, as well as universal time. It would take the nations of the world until 1914 in order to fully adopt Greenwich as the meridian. In addition to these resolutions, the International Meridian Conference offered early success in peaceful diplomatic conference paving the way for International Relations, it elevated the international and formal importance of cartography and its powers, and it signaled the growing Anglo-American power in the world.

The unification of cartography elevated maps to a status of international importance and thereby strengthened the power of those who used them, particularly in political expansion. Geopolitics was revolutionized by the unity of cartography. What followed from the Meridian Conference was not only British power but an assumed superiority of all nations that had staked ownership on global domination through their delegations at the Conference. Finding a common international language in maps, rallying together, paradoxically paved the way for Africa to be divided and Europe itself, when African ambitions were at odds among colonial rulers. That is, more than Greenwich was endorsed in 1884. British imperialism was as well.

Cartography is not responsible for the decisions of historical and political actors, but neither does it exercise neutrality. Conceptions about space and relating to others were codified into the cartographic system and continue to shape the world. The International Meridian Conference of 1884 codified the ideal of global territory as necessitating an international consensus, exemplified by the Prime Meridian through Greenwich. Therefore, territorial conceptions were elevated to international status because of the Conference. Through the elevation of geography and the enshrining of space and time in Greenwich, an Anglo understanding of how the world was ordered, how it operated, and how it ought to be governed, in their eyes, became the operating system for the entire world.

THE UNITED STATES, ANGLO-SAXON IDEALS, AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY IMPERIALISM

The United States was invited to the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. Europe clearly now viewed its standing of “international importance”. South African History’s article on The Berlin Conference states: “However, the United States did not actually participate in the conference both because it had an inability to take part in territorial expeditions as well as a sense of not giving the conference further legitimacy.”¹⁹ This is telling. The United States not only participated in the Meridian Conference but hosted it, because its aims were to regulate navigation through a single merid-

18 Fourth Annual Message (State of the Union Address) by President Arthur, 1 December 1884, Provided by Miller Center of University of Virginia.

19 *South African History Online: The Berlin Conference*. Accessed April 2021. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/berlin-conference>.



ian and to establish universal time. Time and navigation were currencies that the United States were fully engaged in using. Sticking to its more isolationist principles, though, or at least not interested in colonizing Africa, it remained outside of the Berlin Conference. As previously mentioned, there is one important exception, however; one of the tenets agreed upon in Berlin was to recognize the Free State of the Congo.

American reluctance in international events continued to be a mainstay in subsequent decades. The First World War, precipitated by the Scramble for Africa, lasted three years before the Americans entered. The Zimmerman Affair, threatening German invasion through Mexico, drew the United States into the conflict. Even in the Second World War, it took the direct attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (the harbor that was referenced in early Hawaii-American agreements at the time of the Meridian Conference) to draw the United States into the war that had begun two years earlier for Europe. American leadership, exhibited in the Meridian Conference of 1884, remained reluctant until the post-war world. Europeanism, specifically British-centric imperialism, remained the “leader” of the world at that time. This underscores the Prime Meridian being endorsed in 1884 firmly putting Great Britain at the center of the world. The course of global political leadership continued to radiate from Europe, just as the central meridian did. This era often seemed to suggest that America entered in time to tie up European loose ends. Such was the case in the world wars, and such was the case with the Prime Meridian. A number of European conferences had already set the precedent of Greenwich. Perhaps, by including the Americans, a greater ideal of “universality” was achieved. The United States existed in an entirely separate hemisphere of the world and yet observed basically the same legal system, government system, religion, language, and customs as Great Britain. Yes, there were differences in characterization, but the United States had always provided that familiarity of a stranger: both European and yet not Europe. That appeal had placed it perfectly to host the Meridian Conference.

The United States was exuding its own power, its own way of doing things, exercising diplomatic imperialism, in a way, in determining how other nations would interact with it. Moreover, racial categorization of peoples, also a hallmark of imperialism of the nineteenth century, was present in the United States, as evident through the complicated history of African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans.

At this point in time, the United States was not engaged in empire-building or territorial expansion to the extent of Europeans; Puerto Rico, Guam, and others would come later. Although territories were not actively pursued, though, did not mean that the Americans were immune from the immoral thinking of the age, which ranked nations by race. While it is entirely true that Greenwich made economic sense to be the prime meridian, because of the tonnage that already used it as a meridian, viewing Anglo-Saxon civilization as supreme was the backdrop against which the meridian through Greenwich, the British meridian, was chosen, endorsed, made official, and elevated to the status of international.

That continual upholding of Anglo-Saxon ways erupted in ways far less benign than a line on a map. A line by itself is merely a line, but a line exists beyond itself; it is a flagpole of historical significance. In this case, that flag was the Union Jack, symbolizing the Anglo-Saxon way of life, of governing, and of dealing with the world. In a mathematical sense, a line connects two or more points. Philosophically, that line



connects ideologies. Anglo-Saxon thought was extended from Greenwich and outwards to every place that it touched. A line is also known for being longer than it is wide. Again, that understanding can be applied to Greenwich. Wherever the British Union, the Anglo-Saxon way of life, touched: its width, the long shadow of history, its length, far exceeds.

In more intricately linking America and the European countries, via the Meridian Conference and cartography more broadly, Africa was divided with greater ease. Pickles wrote, “Bassett goes on to elaborate the ways in which nineteenth-century mapping practices formed an integral part of the political discourse that fostered and supported the colonization of Africa. Maps were used to promote and assist European expansionism and then, once colonization began, cartographic techniques were used to further the imperial project.”²⁰ Unifying the map system, in its attempts to save lives lost at sea, during the Prime Meridian Conference, did succeed. Previously, different origins or starting meridians, used under different systems and countries, caused confusion and accidents. However, many more lives were lost in the process of carving up Africa, both in terms of Africans themselves and also Europeans and eventually the rest of the world as the First World War broke out over colonial discrepancies in claims for land. Blaisse wrote about this:

It is one of the smaller ironies of American history that a sweeping, international event like the settling of the prime meridian and the protocols of world standard time, which brought a distinguished gathering of leading astronomers and diplomats from the world’s twenty-six independent countries to take part in one of America’s earliest assertions of diplomatic influence on the world stage, should have occurred on Arthur’s otherwise mendacious watch. A month after the Meridian Conference, as related in Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost*, his friends were conniving with the agents of the imperial powers carving up, all too literally, the African continent.²¹

THE BERLIN CONFERENCE

Despite the good that was accomplished in the Washington Conference, in terms of diplomacy and safety in navigation for the world, it is important to also look at another piece of history that was emerging in 1884 and 1885. It too was concerned with navigation, but of rivers, not of seas. It too was concerned with ownership of mapped lands. It, unfortunately, was not as peaceful though. Speaking at the International Meridian Conference, the British scientist John Couch Adams remarked, “that this Conference is not met here at the end of a war to see how territory should be divided, but in a friendly way, representing friendly nations.”²² Dividing territory, Adams

20 J. PICKLES, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping and the Geo-Coded World*, London 2004, p. 108.

21 C. BLAISSE, *Time Lord: Sir Sandford Fleming and the Creation of Standard Time*, 2002, p. 11.

22 Adams, October 6, Transcript of International Meridian Conference, Provided by Project Gutenberg.



stated, is something usually done at the end of a war. That is what makes the Berlin Conference in 1884–1885, when the nations gathered divided territory in Africa between themselves, all the more striking.

Part of the reason why the Berlin Conference was convened was because of the new star: The United States. Extending its democratic mission, it recognized the flag of what would become Belgian interests in the Congo and European nations then sought clarity about possessions and potential land claims in Africa. In his State of the Union address in December 1884, President Arthur summed up the developments in the Congo.

Pursuant to the advice of the Senate at the last session, I recognized the flag of the International Association of the Kongo as that of a friendly government, avoiding in so doing any prejudgment of conflicting territorial claims in that region. Subsequently, in execution of the expressed wish of the Congress, I appointed a commercial agent for the Kongo basin. The importance of the rich prospective trade of the Kongo Valley has led to the general conviction that it should be open to all nations upon equal terms.²³

Again, it was trade that was emphasized for the importance of the Berlin Conference. Recognition of Belgium's claims to the Congo by the United States occurred while Arthur was president. At this juncture, it is crucially important to mention that President Arthur was an early advocate of civil rights in the United States. In a trial predating Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a bus by exactly one hundred years, Chester Arthur, as a young lawyer, represented Elizabeth Jennings when she was ordered to leave a trolley car in Manhattan in 1855. Chester and Jennings successfully sued the trolley company. In addition, as *The New York Times* reported, "In 1852, Arthur's advocacy helped liberate slaves who were being transported from Virginia to Texas through New York."²⁴ In addition, in 1882, President Arthur vetoed the Chinese Exclusion Act, but the Congress overturned this with its votes. The purpose of the act was to prevent Chinese immigration for a decade, and this exclusion was opposed by Arthur.²⁵ These early successes in civil rights testified to President Arthur's principles. The character of the man is undoubtable and sharply contrasts to those of some of the imperialists, such as Leopold II. The Belgian King Leopold II's aims for the Berlin Conference and the recognition of claims by Belgium on lands around the Congo were counter to President Arthur, both as a politician and as a man. That is, President Arthur recognized Belgium's claims on the Congo, but for reasons entirely different than what King Leopold II effected through the Berlin Conference.

23 Fourth Annual Message (State of the Union Address) by President Arthur, 1 December 1884, Provided by Miller Center of University of Virginia.

24 S. ROBERTS, "Elizabeth Jennings, Who Desegregated New York's Trolleys," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, February 1, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/obituaries/elizabeth-jennings-overlooked.html>.

25 Veto Messages, April 4, 1882, A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents: Chester A. Arthur September 19, 1881 to March 4, 1885, Provided by Project Gutenberg.



The link between Chester Arthur and Leopold II came in the form of a Connecticut politician named Henry Shelton Sanford. Originally appointed by Abraham Lincoln in 1861, he had become the American ambassador to Belgium in order to discourage Belgium from recognizing the Confederacy as a legitimate nation during the American Civil War (1861–1865). Interestingly, Sanford became a champion of Leopold II in recognizing Belgium’s holdings in the Congo. In his doctoral thesis in 1967 at the Ohio State University, Lysle Edward Meyer Jr. wrote about Sanford’s role in trying to influence President Arthur’s recognition of Belgium’s influence over the Congo: “Frelinghuysen was assured that the Association’s work was most proper and philanthropic and that American commerce, and thus American citizens, ultimately would benefit from it. In order to prevent any interference by other Europeans with the liberal, humanitarian government being established by Leopold’s officers in the Congo, Sanford urged that the United States should make its position clear in strong support of the Association.”²⁶ Frelinghuysen is a familiar name, as he was the Secretary of State, who extended the invitation for the 1884 Meridian Conference to the nations. He was also a trusted advisor, particularly on foreign affairs for President Arthur.

This intersection of some of the same figures in history in two very different contexts, Washington versus Berlin, illustrates that although people are affected by the times in which they live, people also shape those times. That is, clearly Leopold’s goals for Africa were diametrically opposed to the American understanding of what was happening in recognizing Belgium’s influence over the Congo. Quite simply, Leopold II duped the Americans into thinking that he was a humanitarian. Meyer outlined this well:

What had happened was that Sanford had been forced to face up to the fact that Leopold, who had constantly posed as one of the world’s foremost humanitarians, was involved in one of history’s greatest hoaxes. The Monarch was carving out a personal empire for himself in Africa and was little concerned about the price of the undertaking to the native peoples of the area. He had simply been using international concern respecting the slave trade to further his own ends. Everybody who had been involved in promoting the Congo King’s schemes, therefore, was in some degree guilty by association. When Sanford, overcoming his earlier naivete, began to see the picture in focus, the shock was overwhelming. He had believed in the humanitarian gestures and, while he certainly understood that Leopold, he himself and many others might expect personal gain from the opening of Central Africa, he was dedicated to the concept of the ‘white man’s burden’ and thought that the whole project must benefit Africa first.²⁷

“Africa first” contextualizes the understanding of what was happening to the continent in a way entirely different from what was actually occurring, when Africans were put last by the Belgian Leopold II. Leopold recognized that the United States was growing in importance and courted their support of the recognition of the Congo for

²⁶ L. MEYER, *Henry Shelton Sanford and the Congo*, The Ohio State University (dissertation), 1967, p. 74.

²⁷ MEYER, *Sanford and the Congo*, pp. 238–239.

his Congo Free State through misleading presentations of the truth, including doctored treaties and hidden motives. While the idea of suppressing slavery appealed to the nations in attendance at the Berlin Conference, Leopold was willing to enslave those Congolese who did not support his practices.²⁸ Indeed, Leopold used Sanford for his purposes, knowing the favor that he curried. A book from 1966 states,

In November 1883, months before the Anglo-Portuguese treaty was signed, Sanford returned to the United States from Europe for the express purpose of persuading the government to recognize the Association... He entertained senators and representatives; he furnished information regarding the Congo to the State Department; he became acquainted with members of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations; and everywhere he stressed the philanthropic and humanitarian purposes motivating Leopold and the Association members.²⁹

How the United States was able to be so completely tricked by Leopold points to the larger dismay that the nations experienced after Leopold wreaked havoc in the Congo. Despite being imperialists themselves, for example, the British were astounded by the treatment of the Congolese. It has been said that authors function as the social conscience of a society. If such is the case, then Arthur Conan Doyle, of Sherlock Holmes fame, has taken up that mantle by voicing his objections to what occurred in the Congo:

Thus, within two years of the establishment of the State by the Treaty of Berlin, it had with one hand seized the whole patrimony of those natives for whose ‘-moral and material advantage’ it had been so solicitous, and with the other hand it had torn up that clause in the treaty by which monopolies were forbidden, and equal trade rights guaranteed to all. How blind were the Powers not to see what sort of a creature they had made, and how short-sighted not to take urgent steps in those early days to make it retrace its steps and find once more the path of loyalty and justice! A firm word, a stern act at that time in the presence of this flagrant breach of international agreement, would have saved all Central Africa from the horror which has come upon it, would have screened Belgium from a lasting disgrace, and would have spared Europe a question which has already, as it seems to me, lowered.³⁰

Significantly, the United States did not ratify the agreement of the Berlin Conference. Munene wrote, “The United States did not ratify the treaty signed at Berlin, mainly because there was a different administration in Washington. Opponents of the treaty

28 “Today in labor history: Exposé on King Leopold II bribing Senate”, *People’s World News*, available at <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/today-in-labor-history-expos-on-king-leopold-ii-bribing-senate/> (accessed April 9, 2021).

29 C. CLENDENEN — P. DUGNAN — R. COLLINS, *Americans in Africa, 1865–1900*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford University 1966, p. 54.

30 A. DOYLE, *The Crime of the Congo*, 1909, digitized by Internet Archive with Microsoft in 2007 and available at <https://ia800903.us.archive.org/35/items/crimeofcongo00doyliala/crimeofcongo00doyliala.pdf> (accessed February 9, 2021).



attacked, and continued to attack, American participation in the conference as a violation of American diplomatic tradition.”³¹ Only the European colonial powers ratified the agreement. That is not to exempt the United States from all responsibility in the colonization of Africa. Indeed, they encouraged Otto von Bismark, leader of Germany, to accept the Belgian King Leopold’s claim on the Free Congo. This was one of the points of agreement decided upon in the Berlin Conference. Rather than morality necessarily, the abstention of the United States’ endorsement speaks to the isolationist tendencies exercised by the United States at the time. Hosting the Meridian Conference in 1884 was stepping outside of usual characterisation for the still relatively young nation.

OPPOSITION AT HOME AND ABROAD

Chester Arthur found himself not only in opposition to the Belgian king on the issue, but also in opposition to politicians within the United States. The southern states were controlled by the Democratic party, and in the wake of the Civil War and then Reconstruction, hostilities grew in a “back to Africa” movement. Leopold II’s men even targeted the southern politicians for support by presenting the idea of the Congo as a suitable state for the now freed American slaves. Again, as with the duality of ideas, so radically different, about what was really happening in the Berlin Conference, the Back to Africa movement also was supported by two very different sectors of society. Racists, largely exemplified by the Southern Democrats at this point in history, wanted African-Americans, who were far more American than African, out of the country. Some of these black Americans were newly freed slaves, others were freemen and freewomen to begin with. On the other hand, there were white Americans who had been abolitionists and pro-civil rights who ardently believed that “returning” to Africa could afford their fellow countrymen a less hostile environment and a chance for a better life. The Zionist movement for a Jewish homeland comes to mind in this context.

The United States did not ratify the agreement of the Berlin Conference; only the European colonial powers did. That is not to exempt the United States from all responsibility in the colonization of Africa, but it is worth considering that President Arthur believed there were different intentions than there were by those involved, chiefly Leopold II. In recent years, some European countries have viewed their roles in the colonial history in a new light. The Belgian King Philippe, a descendent of Leopold II apologized for Belgium’s actions against the Congo, as the Congo commemorated its sixtieth anniversary of independence. The Belgian king said, “At the time of the Congo Free State, acts of violence and atrocity were committed that continue to weigh on our collective memory...During the ensuing colonial period suffering and humiliations were inflicted.”³² Another example of this European colonial power be-

31 G. MUNENE, *The United States and the Berlin Conference on the Partition of Africa, 1884–1885*, *Transafrican Journal of History*, Vol. 19, 1990, p. 77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24328676>.

32 B. WATERFIELD, *King Philippe of Belgium Apologises to Congo for Colonial Atrocities*, in: *World — The Times*, *The Times*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/king-philippe-of-belgium-apologises-to-congo-for-colonial-atrocities-c3m823b78>.

ing reexamined is The Netherlands who have reframed talking about their “Golden Age”, recognizing that for those within their colonies during this era in the seventeenth century, the times were far from golden.³³

Although Chester Arthur had a reputation as an abolitionist, later he was criticized because he did not enact federal law to enshrine civil rights. This was particularly important as the Southern Democrats and ex-Confederates took over power from Republicans.³⁴ Despite these criticisms, he did attempt to offer his influence over the Civil Rights Cases, decided by the United States Supreme Court in 1883, which ruled that racial discrimination by private individuals was not under the jurisdiction of the Thirteenth or Fourteenth amendments which outlawed slavery and gave equal protection under the law and voting rights. President Arthur, thus, did attempt to bolster the power of federal law, but he was confined to the parameters of his office, and the balance of powers enacted by the United States Constitution meant that he was limited by the Legislative branch, as was the case with his veto being overturned, or by the Judicial branch, as was the case with the Supreme Court legislation ruling against civil rights issues.

President Arthur stood in leadership during monumental occasions for the United States and the wider world, and he stood up for civil rights issues. Why then has he largely been forgotten by history? In his book, *Chester Alan Arthur: The American Presidents Series: The 21st President, 1881–1885*, Zachary Karabell offered an explanation that the titans of industry, such as Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Vanderbilt captured the attention and imaginations of the public at the end of nineteenth century, where previously the government had, particularly in the 1860s during the Civil War.³⁵ Additionally, Chester Arthur failed to receive the support of his party for reelection. In 1885, Grover Cleveland became president and was the first Democrat president after the American Civil War, which had ended twenty years earlier. One year later, in 1886, President Arthur passed away.

CONCLUSION

As President of the United States, when it was a newly rising star and during both the International Meridian Conference and the Berlin Conference, Chester Arthur’s influence on history continues to reverberate. The forgotten man’s shadow looms large and at times his actions were far from the consequences that he intended. Tragically, this was the case in recognizing the flag for Belgium’s interests in the Congo. However, President Arthur was a successful host to the nations of the world at the Inter-

³³ *End of Golden Age: Dutch Museum Bans Term from Exhibits*, The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, September 13, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/13/end-of-golden-age-amsterdam-museum-bans-term-from-exhibits>.

³⁴ K. PERROTTA — C. BOHAN, *Nineteenth Century Rosa Parks? Assessing Elizabeth Jennings’ Legacy as a Teacher and Civil Rights Pioneer in Antebellum America*, Georgia State University, 2013.

³⁵ Z. KARABELL, *Chester Alan Arthur: The American Presidents Series: The 21st President, 1881–1885*, Macmillan 2004, p. 4.



national Prime Meridian Conference, where democracy, cooperation, and a better world for all, ideals that Arthur was devoted to, were esteemed. The United States, as an emblem of freedom and free of imperialist aims that countries such as Great Britain had, was ideally suited to the hosting of the 1884 Meridian Conference. Furthermore, the United States was a philosophical extension of Europe that had developed with its own unique ambitions, aims, and freedoms. The United States was viewed as a new horizon, ripe with possibility. Turning away from its earlier philosophy of isolation in the Monroe Doctrine and expounding upon its vision of “Manifest Destiny”, the United States stepped into a more global role. President Arthur, himself, was well-liked and capable of getting results from decades-old problems, as exemplified in the Pendleton Act that reformed government corruption. Interaction of the world, through International Relations, and through spatial relations was elevated to international importance at the Meridian Conference of 1884. Theirs is a legacy that continues to shape today. The line the delegates drew through Greenwich continues to echo through history and the present, because of all the implications and understanding behind it: historically, politically, economically, and in terms of representation of reality.

Often overlooked, even among Americans, President Arthur deserves a second look. He contextualizes the American understanding of the nineteenth century world, at times in opposition to European imperialism. Yet, despite that, the reality of international consensus and the knowledge and power derived from maps created an environment that eased colonization. Forces at work in history are often not as black and white as they may first appear. President Arthur and the role of the United States in Africa during the nineteenth century is a prime example. At this juncture in history, where the world’s interconnectivity, in light of a global pandemic, is more evident than ever, and at a time when fair treatment for minorities and the continuing of work in the civil rights arena is reverberating from court rooms to the streets of cities around the world, perhaps it is time to look more closely at President Arthur.