

In What Way Did Chamberlain's Policy Of Imperial Expansion Make The Boer War Inevitable?

(See 1946.002 for an introduction to FB's Balliol essays.)

When Joseph Chamberlain, offered a place in the third Marquess of Salisbury's cabinet of 1895, chose the position of Colonial Secretary there was widespread surprise that so powerful and able a politician should have elected to serve in such a relatively unimportant capacity. However, during the ten years which had elapsed since his resignation from Gladstone's third cabinet Chamberlain had come to realise the growing importance of colonial affairs in the new imperialist era. His attitude was that the colonies were 'undeveloped estates' which, properly managed, could be made to yield great benefits both to their inhabitants and to the mother country. This policy was furthered by such things as the construction of railways and ports, particularly in West Africa, and the subsidising of steamship lines. In South Africa Chamberlain's development policy had to take account of very complicated racial problems, which it will be as well briefly to describe before proceeding further.

The settling of Dutch peasants, or Boers, in South Africa began about the middle of the seventeenth century, and was later augmented by the arrival of French Huguenots. As more and more settlers arrived at the Cape conditions became overcrowded owing to the immense areas required for each farm. Thus the trek northward began. When the effects of British conquest, completed in 1803, were felt a fresh impetus was given to the northward movement. Some Boers crossed the Orange River and established the Transvaal, which was recognised as an independent republic by the Sand River Convention of 1852. However, by 1877 the republic was so weakened by internal strife that little objection was raised when the British agent annexed it in furtherance of a scheme of the Colonial Secretary of the time, the fourth Earl of Carnarvon, for the formation of a South African Confederation. This was designed to unite the Cape Colony, Natal, the Orange River Colony and the Transvaal, but failed owing to the tactlessness of Lord Carnarvon's agents and the lack of a desire for federation by any of the four states concerned.

The position of the Boer population, forced to keep in subjection native tribes outnumbering them by ten to one, was further complicated by the inrush of foreigners, mainly British, which followed the discovery of gold on the Rand in 1884. The 'Outlanders', as they were contemptuously called, threatened to upset the stability of the old agricultural communities, and the Boers not unnaturally felt no disposition to treat them kindly. They were denied any civic rights and were very heavily taxed.

The events just described give some indication of the basic difficulty of the South African situation as caused by racial complexities. Now let us see in what way Chamberlain dealt with the concrete problems arising out of these complexities.

When Gladstone's second cabinet took office in 1880 Chamberlain held the position of President of the Board of Trade, the first Earl of Kimberley being Colonial Secretary. As the Colonial Secretary was in the Lords, Chamberlain was chosen to deal with colonial matters in the Commons, a fact which indicates how, even in those early days, his interests lay in the direction of empire. At the early cabinet meetings of the new government the question of the Transvaal was raised and Chamberlain urged that the annexation of 1877 be revoked, saying:

'I doubt the wisdom and the permanence of the annexation. Unless some unforeseen circumstances lead to a large immigration of Englishmen into the Transvaal, I believe the Boers will, sooner or later, worry this country into granting their independence.'

This demonstrates Chamberlain's belief that expansion could only be carried out profitably by emigration from Britain. He had no desire to see the swallowing-up of purely alien peoples. Chamberlain continued to advocate retrocession even after the defeat at Majuba had greatly lowered British prestige in the eyes of the Boers, and this was carried out a short time later. Kruger's growing confidence was not lessened by the London Convention of 1884, which gave wider powers of self-government to the Boers and failed to mention the principle of 'suzerainty', which had been insisted on in the original retrocession. When, however, the boundaries laid down by the London Convention were enlarged by the 'annexation' of the territory of Montsioa, a native chief, the cabinet (largely at the instigation of Chamberlain) sent a highly successful expedition to drive out the marauders.

By the time Chamberlain was once again in office, i.e. in 1895, the 'unforeseen circumstances' imagined by him in 1880 had come to pass. The Outlanders, largely made up of Britons, were installed in the Transvaal, which thus became legitimately within the scope of the British Empire. The plots for an Outlander rising, which culminated in the Jameson Raid, were largely the work of Cecil Rhodes, who received the impression that Chamberlain concurred in them. This was largely due to the misleading reports of such emissaries as Dr Morris, who seemed to regard Chamberlain's uncomprehending reception of their hints and innuendoes as a form of guarded consent. Rhodes was also able to impute some of the blame to Chamberlain on the grounds of the 'now or never' telegram which was sent by him. Instead of taking a high line with Rhodes over his part in the Jameson Raid, Chamberlain allowed himself to be intimidated. The Inquiry held in 1897 hushed up most of the facts, and Rhodes was given a 'testimonial' in the House of Commons by the Colonial Secretary. As Asquith was to remark later, 'if the South African War was to be dated from any moment, it was from the evening in the House of Commons when Chamberlain gave his final certificate to Rhodes'.

The Jameson Raid, and the lenient treatment which its instigators received, inflamed the suspicions of the Boers and led to the building up of armaments. Chamberlain hardly soothed the Boers by his defence of the Outlanders in their struggle against 'oppression', by his suggestions to the Boers regarding reforms, and by his insistence that the British government possessed rights over the external relations of the Boer government which it intended 'to maintain in their integrity'. All these sentiments, however, had the approval of the British people and of the British Empire as a whole.

Chamberlain showed his determination to maintain British interests in South Africa by the appointment of Sir Alfred Milner as High Commissioner and Governor of the Cape in February 1897. Milner was chosen as being 'a staunch imperialist and a likely agent for a forward policy', and proved considerably more 'forward' than Chamberlain himself. By the end of 1898 Milner had decided that a vigorous assertion of Britain's rights was necessary, even at the risk of war, although he was not able fully to convince Chamberlain of this. After forwarding a petition bearing over 20,000 signatures to London pleading for 'protection' for the British residents, Milner advanced a scheme whereby the British in the Transvaal were to renounce their nationality and become Transvaal citizens, ultimately being in a position to outvote the Boers. Chamberlain and the cabinet considered that Kruger would fight before yielding to such demands but were assured that this was not the case by Jameson and other Outlander emissaries. On May 4th 1899 Chamberlain bound himself to the cause of the Outlanders by publishing a despatch from Milner demanding government intervention into the case of thousands of British subjects said to be 'in the position of helots'. President Steyn of the O.F.S. suggested a conference between Milner and Kruger, which took place on May 31st and was unsuccessful, both Milner's citizenship plan and Chamberlain's suggestion of Home Rule for the Rand being rejected. Chamberlain sent a cable urging Milner not to break off negotiations too readily, but it arrived too late. Kruger actually passed a measure through the Volksraad granting limited franchise concessions, but it was so unsatisfactory from the British point of view that it was described by Milner as 'worthless'. Changing his tactics, Kruger offered to yield on the franchise question, provided that the British government

renounced all claim to 'suzerainty'. Chamberlain stiffly declined to consider this suggestion, and the leaders on both sides, each somewhat deceived regarding the willingness to fight of the other, adopted stronger attitudes. The war was made inevitable by Kruger's ultimatum concerning the withdrawal of British troops from South Africa.

One fact shows clearly through the mist of complications and mistakes which surrounds the period leading up to the Boer War. That fact is that Chamberlain's policy of extending the power of Britain to all parts of the globe where large groups of her subjects were to be found was bound to mean the inclusion of South Africa, willy-nilly, in the British Empire. This policy was enunciated on October 19 1899, when Chamberlain said: 'we are bound to show that we are both willing and able to protect British subjects everywhere when they are made to suffer from oppression and injustice'. Had the Boers proved more willing to accept the suzerainty of Britain, and had their distrust of the motives of the British not been fanned by innumerable errors, war might have been avoided. But, given Chamberlain's policy and given strong Boer nationalism the war can be seen to have been inevitable.