

Lord Palmerston's achievements as foreign secretary



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Assess the achievement of Palmerston's first period at the Foreign Office, between 1830 and 1841.

Viscount Palmerston was, without doubt, one of the most famous foreign secretaries ever to have held the office- and he did so on two occasions- between 1830-41, and 1846-52. As with many famous figures he is also rather a controversial one, receiving a mixture of praise and criticism from historians. Anthony Wood generally sees him as a dextrous negotiator, who threatened to use force in a judicious and responsible manner ^[1]. Eric Evans, on the other hand, is more inclined to see Palmerston's obvious sabre rattling and 'Gun Boat diplomacy' as an irresponsible and unprincipled pursuit of the National interest ^[2] - that aggravated diplomatic wounds (especially with the French) - and left Lord Aberdeen (when he took over in 1841) to 'pick up the pieces' ^[3]. The function of this essay will be to evaluate Palmerston's achievements in the first (and perhaps more influential) period under the premierships of Earl Grey and Lord Melbourne in light of this historiographical debate.

This essay will adopt a chronological structure to facilitate the clarity of discussion. It will cover the three most famous events in British Foreign affairs in this period- the Belgium Crisis of 1830-1, the creation of the Quadruple Alliance in 1834, the finally the Egyptian Crises concerning France and Russia from 1831-41. It will then assess if, on balance, Palmerston's first period at the Foreign Office can generally be called a success, as argued by Wood, or in fact did more harm than good- as argued by Evans.

Palmerston's general attitude to foreign affairs was famously one of the pursuit of national self-interest above the maintenance of any kind of consistent, or 'ethical' position. He told the House of Commons:

" We have no eternal allies, we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow"

For Evans, this attitude represented a *carte blanche* form of pragmatism. Palmerston was able to wrap himself in the union jack- often mobilising British public opinion behind him- and effectively conduct himself as he pleased with little regard for the sovereignty or stability of other nations- and most importantly- without any regard for long term-worsening of diplomatic relations.

This approach was first demonstrated in respect of the Crisis in Belgium in 1830-1. In the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Belgium had been placed under the United Provinces of the Dutch- ignoring the obvious differences in religion and national feeling ^[4]. Eventually, Belgium Patriots were able to gather enough support to drive out the Dutch garrison from Brussels. King Louis Phillippe, who had come to power in France in 1830, was known to favour a satellite Belgium state under a French protectorate- although it was unknown as the extent the French were prepared to use military force to get it. At a London conference in 1831, Palmerston found himself in a difficult position- but refused to hand over two fortresses on the Belgium border to the French- thus ensuring the creation of a neutral Belgium. Some months later, after the French posted troops inside Belgium, Palmerston let it be known that he would be prepared to use force against them if they did not

withdraw ^[5]. The French could not take this risk, and retreated. A treaty was signed in December 1832, establishing an international guarantee of Belgium's neutrality.

On the face of it, this seemed like a triumph for Palmerston. It could be argued that he had played the game of diplomatic bluff to perfection, and by refusing to assent to French demands and sabre rattling, had achieved a settlement most inkeeping with his goal of maintaining British national interest- and one which ensured a potentially dangerous French power-base did not grow any more menacing. However, there was no doubt that 'Lord Palmerston's' abrasive qualities had soured Anglo-French relations - and perhaps a more delicate and consensual stance might have yielded a more satisfactory outcome to all sides

The diplomatic problems with France did not go away. In 1834, the Queens of Spain and Portugal (who were constitutional rulers) were threatened by absolutist regimes in their own countries- and Palmerston was suspicious that the French planned to take advantage. His idea to create a 'Quadruple Alliance' between all four countries seemed, on the face of it, another great success. France could not diplomatically refuse an alliance already agreed to by Britain, Spain, and Portugal ^[6], and was seemingly once again outmanoeuvred by what Palmerston called a 'Capital Hit all of my own doing' (He was not known for his modesty). Palmerston had always been unequivocal in his support for Constitutional rulers, and Britain's self-interest was arguably sustained by the maintenance of moderate regimes in the Iberian Peninsula ^[7]. On this occasion, he had arguably used diplomatic

guile rather than the implied threat of military force to achieve success- so it can perhaps be said that Palmerston was occasionally prepared to dock his gunboat for a spot of peaceful diplomacy. Once again, though, the price of safeguarding British Interests had worsened Anglo-French relations.

In 1831, Mehemet Ali, a rebellious vassal of the Turkish Sultan Mahmud in Egypt, declared war and took possession of Palestine and Syria from the Turkish Empire. The Russians- in offering to help - forced the beleaguered Sultan to sign a rough treaty which effectively passed control of the strategically vital Unkiar Skelessi Straits to them. Palmerston was worried about an escalation of Russian influence- as it heightened his fear of a potential alliance between Russia and France. In 1839, the Sultan made an ill-advised attack on Ali, and ended up suffering an ignominious defeat, and gave the vassal his excuse to carry the war deep into Turkish territory. It was Palmerston's policy to support Turkey, mainly because it dispersed the power base of Europe, and also because of a recently signed commercial treaty between the two nations. The Turkish town of Aden (which had the added benefit of being a useful place for British steamships to replenish their coal stocks en route to India) was placed under a British protectorate. Rather predictably, the French sided with Mehemet Ali. Palmerston offered a deal to his enemies- that Ali could retain Egypt and Syria for his lifetime, but the French encouraged him to turn it down. Palmerston refused to climb down, and instructed Lord Granville (the British Ambassador in Paris) to:

“ Covey to him (King Louis Phillipe) in the most friendly and unoffensive manner possible...that if France begins a war, she will lose her ships,

colonies and commerce before she sees the end of it; that her army of
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Algiers will cease to give her anxiety, and that Mehemet Ali will be chucked into the Nile" [8]

This uncompromising stance once again was a gamble, made more intense when British Marines helped capture the cities of Acre and Beirut after Ali rejected Palmerston's deal. France (also worried by threatening movements in Bavaria) was in no position to engage Britain in a war, and she ended up having to aid Britain and Russia to defeat Ali [9]. Eventually, Russia was even persuaded to relinquish control of the Straits, and all four powers agreed to return to the original settlement of 1809 [10]. Disaster had seemingly been diverted again by Palmerston's tough diplomatic line. For Wood, he had read France's hand perfectly [11], and once again maintained peace, even if (for Evans) he had put several noses out of joint with more 'Gun Boat Diplomacy' [12].

In Conclusion, this essay has shown that Palmerston's abrasive approach to Foreign policy was generally a great success. In each of the three instances covered, his reluctance to compromise worked in Britain's interests, and against those of France- her eternal foe. Undoubtedly, he did prioritise the national interest above all else, but it could be argued that- such was Britain's dominance- that her interests and the goal of stability and peace in Europe were by no means unrelated. In fact, one could argue from this evidence that they were very closely linked, and that maybe Palmerston's reputation as irresponsible is slightly unfounded.

It can be said that Palmerston's hands-on and confrontational approach was extremely risky, and that there was a large element of luck involved in achieving a successful outcome on each occasion. For example, had France not withdrawn from Belgium in 1831, a bloody war might have ensued. In 1839, it may only have been the sudden advent of threatening activity in Prussia that made the French swallow their pride, and abandon Mehemet Ali. Palmerston was also aided by his fleet of gunboats that backed up everything he said. Britain's naval dominance at that time allowed him to adopt a far more hard-line and interventionist approach than many other Foreign Secretaries before or since. Overall, Palmerston's guile- backed up by his luck and his powerbase - made his period at the Foreign Office between 1830-41 extremely successful, but arguably it could have easily gone horribly wrong.

Bibliography

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Footnotes

[1] See Wood, ' Lord Palmerston at the Foreign Office 1830-41' in Nineteenth Century Britain , 1960, pp. 156-63

[2] See Evans, ' Influence without Entanglement: Foreign Affairs, 1815-46' in The Forging of the Modern State 1783-1870, 1983, pp. 210-3

[3] *ibid*, p. 211

[4] Wood, pp. 157-8

[5] In a letter to Granville, he wrote “ The French must go out of Belgium or we have a general War”. See Wood, p. 159

[6] Droz, Europe between Revolutions 1815-48, 1967, p. 236

[7] Evans, p. 211

[8] See Evans p. 211, also Wood, p. 157

[9] Felling, A History of England, 1973, p. 856

[10] Wood, p. 163

[11] *ibid*

[12] Evans, p. 211