Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to our special series on my PhD thesis. After assessing the wars with China and Afghanistan, and noting the role which the rhetoric of NH played there in mobilising opinion, justifying contentious policies and defending against criticism, here we see an example, almost entirely forgotten, of a case where all the usual rules were apparently thrown out the window. When Madrid insulted the British ambassador by rudely demanding his expulsion, there was certainly good reason to expect that the usual formula of satisfaction would follow insult, yet this is not what happened. Even with Palmerston having returned as FS, with a new Whig government led by Lord John Russell from 1846, the FS showed that NH could contain some unexpected caveats.

This was explained by the idea of forbearance, which essentially stipulated mercy when Britain received an insult from another power. If the power was sufficiently weak, this could justify Britons standing back and refusing to take offence. But what on the surface seems like a curious ideological quirk of NH, could in reality be a useful method for avoiding costly, unrewarding confrontations. With no appetite for war with Spain in 1848, the news of the Spanish insult placed the Whig government in a difficult position. There was no option, if peace was preferred, but to indicate that Britain would not seek to punish Spain for its act. Yet, as always, the opposition were on hand to demand that the usual formula be pursued, and to challenge the government’s line that NH was upheld.

Consistency was important in this sense, and as forbearance had been established as a legitimate option to beleaguered governments, we shouldn’t imagine Palmerston as the creator of this option C. While this consistency mattered, what seemed to matter more was context. Having spent many years attempting to improve Anglo-Spanish relations – which really meant trying to keep Madrid out of France’s orbit – Palmerston recognised that antagonistic policies would only hinder this policy goal. By showing mercy, Palmerston could avoid these complications and a thankless war, but could he survive the political reaction to his failure to acquire satisfaction? Let’s find out, as I take you to 1848, and the second chapter of my PhD thesis.

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**2.2: Forbearance or Vindication? The Expulsion of Ambassador Bulwer from Madrid [1848]**

As the campaigns against Afghanistan and China demonstrated, vindicating insults was a strong imperative of Victorian foreign policy. It was accepted that insults demanded satisfaction, yet, although apparently eager to pursue the honour-script, an incident involving Britain’s ambassador to Spain proved that there were exceptions to its rules. During the tumultuous year of 1848,[[1]](#footnote-1) Palmerston’s attempt to advise Madrid on the composition of her government offended the Spanish court,[[2]](#footnote-2) which reacted by abruptly expelling Sir Henry Bulwer, Britain’s ambassador. On the surface, the Spanish reaction was an intolerable insult from a theatre where Britain had invested considerable energy and resources in recent years.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, John Russell’s Whig administration declared its intention not to seek satisfaction from Spain, and they defended this decision by professing a determination to exercise forbearance.

Forbearance prescribed that magnanimity and even mercy be shown to weaker powers, because Britain’s unrivalled position meant she did not need to be overly sensitive to all such slights. One is struck by the contrast with previous cases; forbearance was explicitly denied to China, yet it was permitted when insulted by a European power.[[4]](#footnote-4) Critics noticed this inconsistency,[[5]](#footnote-5) but focused mostly on Palmerston’s meddling, which had facilitated the insult. Others presented the familiar argument that a failure to acquire satisfaction would confirm British humiliation. Yet, the opposition was not united, and with some exceptions, British media paid scant attention to the offence. This is reflected in the fact that only a single substantial Parliamentary debate was devoted to the incident,[[6]](#footnote-6) before it faded into the background of such a momentous year.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Notwithstanding its apparent insignificance, the incident is noteworthy because of what it suggests about the conditional application of the honour-script and its accompanying rhetoric. Palmerston was willing to leverage honour to justify policy, but where the Foreign Secretary did not desire confrontation, he could be remarkably lenient. With no public appetite for a war with Spain, and no strategic advantages to be gained from escalation which would likely push Spain closer to France,[[8]](#footnote-8) Palmerston’s stance was politically and strategically logical. However, by shrugging off the insult, Palmerston was clearly ignoring the honour-script. This suggests that the vindication of honour was affected by the nuances of stately relationships, and the perceived benefits to be accrued from pushing certain incidents to their more provocative conclusion.

On 5 June 1848, Sir George Bankes – a Protectionist, later to serve in Derby’s minority government – presented the controversy to the House of Commons. Taking a traditional view of the incident, Bankes’ Motion upheld that Palmerston’s interference in Spain ‘has placed the British Government and our Representative at the Court of Madrid, in a position humiliating in its character’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Bankes was astonished that no Minister ‘had thought fit to give any explanation upon the matter to those anxious for the maintenance of the honour and character of the country.’ Cautioning the Spanish, Bankes observed that ‘The Spanish Minister was greatly mistaken if he supposed that an outrage on the person of our Ambassador…would be regarded as of a trifling character by the people of this country.’

Bankes suggested that the government would be better equipped to demand satisfaction ‘if they admitted that errors had been committed upon their own side; and the mode in which they had been committed had probably led to the subsequent transactions.’[[10]](#footnote-10) Bankes asserted that ‘while he was ready to vindicate the honour of this country, still he could not adopt that course without admitting that the noble Lord had placed them originally in the wrong.’ Bankes advised that Palmerston’s errors in judgement meant the Foreign Secretary should apologise before proceeding with vindication.[[11]](#footnote-11) A similar expression had been used by Lord Stanley the previous month, where he advised Palmerston to admit wrongdoing towards Spain, since Spain would reciprocate with an apology for the offence to Bulwer.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Ministerial allies disagreed. Irish MP Richard Sheil believed that Spain had ‘availed themselves of the occasion which they thought had presented itself of offering with impunity a gross insult to the benefactor of their Sovereign. We are told that the English Minister is humiliated.’[[13]](#footnote-13) It would be ‘strange’, Sheil said, ‘if the Minister of England were humiliated by the Minister of a Government that not many years ago fell down upon its knees before him.’ Humiliation, Sheil declared, ‘could never be allied with right, with truth, with justice or with honour’ and ‘it is the same with nations as with men,’ a point he elaborated further with a familiar metaphor.[[14]](#footnote-14) Would the insult disgrace Britain? No, Sheil insisted; ‘the vile insult would recoil upon the heartless ingrate, who would pull down shame and humiliation upon himself.’ Sheil referred to that Anglo-Spanish correspondence before the House which ‘reflects so much real ignominy upon the thankless Ministers of Spain.’[[15]](#footnote-15)

This theme of Spanish ingratitude was maintained by Viscount Mahon, who nonetheless regretted that Palmerston had overstepped in making his recommendations to the Spanish government.[[16]](#footnote-16) At a moment ‘when the national honour was at stake, and when there was a determination to suffer no affront from any foreign power,’ he wished that ‘they had not been invited to decide upon conjecture instead of certainty.’ While the Foreign Secretary had erred, the Spanish reaction was unjustified, and Madrid ‘should have borne in mind the not very remote time when we stepped forward to assist them with our blood, with our treasure, with our moral influence.’[[17]](#footnote-17) Considering this, Mahon believed that ‘no party differences in that House—no feeling of any kind—would prevent all the Members of that House from concurring in any course which the vindication of our national honour might call upon us to pursue.’[[18]](#footnote-18)

But Russell did not seek vindication, and he provided an interesting anecdote to explain how Britain could absorb the Spanish insult without the usual recourse. Russell spoke of Lord Archibald Hamilton, who was offended by a stranger while in the company of friends. Hamilton’s choice was to either ‘burst out laughing, or knock him down’, and he was advised to do the former, which he did. This, Russell insisted, was the case with Palmerston towards Spain: ‘He must either have taken this up as a great national quarrel, or have passed it by as a matter of no importance.’[[19]](#footnote-19) In line with this, Russell explained that ‘whilst they require that English honour should be maintained, they do at the same time require the exercise of a very great forbearance’ in their relations with Spain, which were ‘very peculiar’ and ‘very delicate’. Russell reflected that if British and Spanish power was on a more equal footing, then ‘it would be more difficult or more liable to suspicion, if that forbearance were shown’, however, ‘seeing what is the power of England and what is now the power of Spain’, the Prime Minister recommended ‘that we are bound to show to utmost temper and forbearance in our dealings with that country.’[[20]](#footnote-20) It was perhaps necessary for Russell to qualify this forbearance by insisting ‘we shall take care that no stain shall fall upon the honour of England’, but that anything short of this, he would be ‘ready to submit to for the purpose of maintaining the most friendly relations with Spain.’[[21]](#footnote-21)

The qualification notwithstanding, Russell would have known that this position left the government vulnerable to criticism.[[22]](#footnote-22) Could forbearance truly suffice? Benjamin Disraeli reiterated this theme, demanding to know ‘why a full and complete satisfaction has not long before this been exacted.’ Satisfaction for the offence must precede any other considerations, and ‘it is this primary condition which we ought to demand to be fulfilled, before we enter into the question of the policy of the Government, or of the conduct of the Minister.’[[23]](#footnote-23) Disraeli insisted that ‘Before they entered into negotiations on any point, the honour and character of the country ought to have been vindicated.’ Whatever the Spanish justification, ‘a gross outrage has been inflicted upon this country,’ and on Bulwer himself, and Disraeli recommended the dismissal of the Spanish Ambassador in London ‘as retaliation’. He reminded Members that ‘It is one of the first duties of the House of Commons to be very jealous of the honour of public Ministers intrusted in foreign countries to act on behalf of this.’[[24]](#footnote-24)

Disraeli was told that negotiations with Spain were still ‘going on.’ ‘Going on, for what?’ he challenged, ‘To receive fresh insults?’ Disraeli declared that Bulwer’s treatment constituted ‘an insult to your Sovereign, an insult to yourselves, an insult to the nation at large’, and he believed that ‘The more you negotiate, the more certain you are to receive fresh insults.’[[25]](#footnote-25) Parliament’s first duty was ‘to express our sense of the gross and unprecedented outrage against the dignity of the Sovereign and the honour of the country,’ but Disraeli advised Members not to blame Palmerston alone, since the Foreign Secretary regularly rejected the Whigs’ damaging liberal philosophy ‘to vindicate the interests and the honour of our country.’[[26]](#footnote-26) Sir Robert Inglis, Conservative MP for Oxford University, made a similar appeal, believing it ‘unprecedented in the history of England that such an insult as the expulsion of Sir H. Bulwer from Madrid had been offered to the Crown of England in the person of one of its representatives’ and ‘almost unparalleled in the diplomatic history of Europe.’[[27]](#footnote-27) One is struck by the hyperbolic tone of the opposition, and the claim that Spain’s insult was unprecedented in British history.[[28]](#footnote-28) By investing each new insult with this hyperbole, critics intended to place as much pressure as possible upon the government. The greater the sense of outrage from the opposition, the more effective their use of the rhetoric of honour would be.

Dismissing the Spanish insult as small in comparison to the treatment of Alexander McLeod in New York, the imprisonment of Captain Elliot in Canton, or the betrayal of British officers in Kabul would have undermined the opposition’s line of attack. That Britain had endured far worse in the recent past did not deter the Earl of Aberdeen, who also embraced hyperbole in the House of Lords, claiming ‘that this is the first time a British Minister ever suffered such an indignity,’[[29]](#footnote-29) and concluding that ‘The whole proceeding does, I must say, appear to me so utterly unsuited to the dignity of this country.’ To receive even a form of satisfaction, he recommended ‘some sort of understanding…with the Spanish Government,’ since ‘we are the parties who have received such an insult as I believe was never before inflicted upon the British Government.’[[30]](#footnote-30)

Ministers would have to meet this hyperbole if they hoped to dismantle the opposition’s argument, but they were aided by an unlikely ally. Having divided from the Conservatives, Sir Robert Peel declared that he could not approve of the Protectionists’ Motion – which declared that the Government had been placed ‘in a position humiliating in its character’ – because of his perceived duty.[[31]](#footnote-31) This duty was ‘to manifest, on the part of the House of Commons, a desire to support the Crown in vindicating the insulted honour of the nation.’ Peel cautioned that if the House voted that the Government had been placed ‘in a position humiliating to its character,’ then ‘so far from aiding the Government in vindicating the honour of England,’ it would instead have the effect of sending Ministers away…

…with disgrace tied round their necks by a vote of the House of Commons; and, so far from enabling them to vindicate the insulted honour of the country, you would incapacitate them from taking that position and assuming that high tone in the discussion which you wish them to exhibit.

This affirmed that the national honour could be best vindicated with the aid of the Commons. Conversely, it suggested that the Commons could also constrain the nation’s ability to vindicate its honour. Elaborating further, Peel imagined that if Madrid saw British policy condemned as humiliating, they would conclude that “it is utterly impossible for us to attach any weight to the representations you may make."[[32]](#footnote-32) These factors would complicate British efforts to obtain satisfaction, and would cast aspersions on Bulwer’s character. Some technical criticisms aside,[[33]](#footnote-33) Peel refused to support a resolution which would weaken government authority in its Spanish relations, particularly as the full story of these negotiations had yet to be told. Above all, he proclaimed, ‘I cannot sanction a resolution which records that my country is in a humiliated state.’[[34]](#footnote-34) If Parliament believed the country humiliated, Spain would discern that London had erred, and would be unlikely to grant even the smallest form of satisfaction.

Palmerston agreed with much of this interpretation, noting that Bankes intended the House of Commons ‘to affirm a resolution that this country is in a state of humiliation. That is certainly not a mode in which, in my opinion, his object can be accomplished.’[[35]](#footnote-35) Palmerston did defend both his own conduct and that of Bulwer, though he cast some doubt on the judgement of the latter, when he explained that his now infamous despatch to the ambassador was not meant to be read word-for-word to the Spanish Government.[[36]](#footnote-36) Yet, Palmerston did insist that Bulwer had acted correctly, noting the difficulty, to that point, in getting the Spanish to heed British communiques. Palmerston observed that some believed ‘I evinced a want of proper spirit on the occasion’, others ‘that I should have shown myself more offended by the conduct of the Spanish Government’, while others still ‘that I was too much offended, and that I exhibited in my communication too great an indication of a sense of offence.’[[37]](#footnote-37) Palmerston clarified his own position on the matter, arguing ‘this was not a case in which the British Government believed themselves offended.’ He concluded by both accepting responsibility for Bulwer’s conduct, and reiterating his approval of the ambassador’s policy.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Some newspapers presented the 5 June debate in grandiose terms, testifying to its immense importance.[[39]](#footnote-39) Others argued the entire debate had been a waste of time.[[40]](#footnote-40) Those that did take more notice of the insult were thus significant in their exceptionalism.[[41]](#footnote-41) The Tory *Morning Post* asserted that ‘we shall demand ample satisfaction for the gross insult,’ and ‘in the event of a refusal we will take it by force.’ The government must pursue satisfaction in this manner, the *Post* warned, ‘unless they are prepared to render the British name a byword among nations, unless they wish to make the world believe that England is upon her last legs and unable to resent a gross affront.’ If the Spanish insult went unanswered, this would ‘mightily increase their prestige and lower the character of England.’[[42]](#footnote-42) Liberal weekly the *Era* declared: ‘the national honour has received a wound, and it must be redressed or somehow healed,’ and it saw nothing ‘to justify the insolence of the Spaniard, and no reason for tamely brooking his wanton and outrageous disregard of all the obligations he owes us.’[[43]](#footnote-43)

The Conservative *Leeds Times* lamented that Russell ‘strives to turn the whole affair into a joke – and a very sad joke it is.’ The debate in the Commons was ‘feeble and unsatisfactory’ with ‘no heartiness in the attack or the defence’, and ‘It is to the meddlesome spirit in which our foreign policy is conducted that we owe this humiliation, and the necessity of submitting to it without demanding reparation.’ An editorial in the same paper catastrophised the incident in hyperbolic language, asserting that ‘The outrage on the national honour, is such as England has not had to suffer for centuries,’ while blaming ‘pacific principles’ for the government’s timidity in provoking an insult and then shying away from its consequences. Russell’s government ‘are compelled to skulk out of the dilemma as well as they can – certainly with little credit to themselves.’ It noted that Russell’s proposal ‘to laugh the affair off’ does ‘not accord very well with national dignity.’ Russell could ‘devise no means of resenting the insult, or obtaining reparation’, and that therefore ‘the Premier of England proposes to pocket the insult offered to the national dignity, and get up a laugh’, but that such a laugh would not last.[[44]](#footnote-44)

*The Times* complained that ‘no one seriously grappled’ with the insult, adding that Russell’s comments were ‘extremely unsatisfactory.’ The onus was on the Prime Minister to make it clear that the ‘deliberate insults on a British envoy’ were ‘not regarded by Her Majesty’s Government or by the people of England as a light or indifferent matter.’ But instead, Russell delivered ‘a pointless and inappropriate anecdote’. *The Times* believed Russell’s government were determined to take ‘the lowest possible line in their conduct’, and by relying upon Britain’s ‘unassailable dignity’, the government were in fact emboldening the Spanish ‘to pursue the same insolent course’ in the future. This was surprising, *The Times* reflected, considering Palmerston’s status as one ‘who has always professed that the dignity and security of this country’ were paramount. Considering the Ministerial tone of magnanimity, *The Times* warned that the Spanish ‘will presume upon a forbearance they cannot understand’, and there was ‘no greater danger than that which arises from an apparent insensibility to foreign injuries.’[[45]](#footnote-45)

Perhaps reflecting the theme of hyperbole, one contributor even asserted that the insult ‘authorises’ the government, ‘without violation of moral right,’ to seize Cuba and the Philippines as compensation for Spain’s default on its foreign loans.[[46]](#footnote-46) No such campaigns materialised, nor did Britain, or indeed Bulwer,[[47]](#footnote-47) materially suffer from the incident. The sheer volume of activity in Europe may have shielded the government from such consequences, but one could argue that Russell’s position of forbearance enabled Britain to avoid a costly campaign – this was strategically sensible in a time of European instability.[[48]](#footnote-48) As *The Times* discerned, it was an objectively surprising position to take, given Palmerston’s record of deploying his uncompromising rhetoric in recent memory. It might be expected that Palmerston would meet his critics by emphasising the Spanish insult, and fomenting public desire for vindication as he had towards China and the United States, or, indeed, as he did towards Greece two years later. Yet, the Foreign Secretary effectively stood down. He deactivated the traditional machinery of vindication, and stated explicitly that Britain took no offence. Perhaps the Foreign Secretary gambled that the steady flow of tumultuous foreign news, twinned with the divided state of the Conservatives, would provide the necessary political protection.[[49]](#footnote-49) If so, his assessment proved correct, and Bulwer’s predicament disappeared from the debate hereafter.

Yet these exchanges do shed significant light upon the honour-script. Was it a belief system which could be bypassed by specific circumstances, or were contemporaries constrained to justify their positions within its rhetorical framework? Notably, Ministers never discounted the importance or value of national honour; they instead positioned forbearance as a benefit of Britain’s privileged position, and as an example of British virtue in the face of Spanish ingratitude. The traditional formula of demanding satisfaction was not pursued, yet Parliament did not confirm British humiliation, and Spain did not take advantage of a ‘forbearance they cannot understand’ by pressing for greater concessions. This suggests that the honour-script could be adapted to circumstances, and was not as rigid as Avner Offer claimed. Yet, it could be argued that in 1848, Britain engaged with the ‘alternative scripts of honour’ that Offer observed, which included those of ‘timely concession, of conciliation, cooperation, and trust.’[[50]](#footnote-50) This rare instance of moderation was facilitated by the rhetoric of honour, which emphasised forbearance and magnanimity above all.

While defending this magnanimity in Parliament, Palmerston had declared ‘I should rather be blamed for being too tardy in taking offence, than for being too prone and prompt to pick a quarrel on such grounds with a foreign nation.’[[51]](#footnote-51) This position was tested when in 1850, the Foreign Secretary seized upon an insult delivered to a British subject in Greece, thereby facilitating a new crisis. This Don Pacifico Affair featured the same familiar determination to vindicate insult as previous incidents. Where Bulwer’s plight required no vindication, Greece was afforded no such forbearance. The case suggested that insult, much like national honour itself, was in the eye of the beholder.

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Clearly, there was an asterisk beside the HS, and the idea that every insult would always be repelled by confrontation and force. In special cases, where few advantages could be gained from war, contemporaries were willing to set the rigidity of NH aside in return for peace. But how was this policy of forbearance justified? As Charles Babington Macauley had declared: ‘The place of this country among nations was not so mean or ill ascertained that we should trouble ourselves to resist every petty slight which we might receive. Conscious of her power, England could bear that her Sovereign could be called a barbarian, and her people described as savages, destitute of every useful art. When our Ambassadors were obliged to undergo a degrading prostration, in compliance with their regulations, conscious of our strength, we were more amused than irritated. But there was a limit to that forbearance.’

But this was unlikely to please everyone, both because some believed that NH should be pursued as before, and because opposition politics required an answer to the government’s claims. It was certainly possible to complain of Palmerston’s excessive interventionism as the cause of controversies, but Palmerston was careful to explain that his advice to Spain was always given respectfully, and where this was not done, local officials, such as Ambassador Bulwer, had to take some responsibility. Lord Brougham had thus explained that ‘When Lord Palmerston recommended Mr. Bulwer, "if a fitting opportunity offers" to do so-and-so, he did not mean that it was to be when Mr. Bulwer should have the rare opportunity of being possessed of a clean sheet of white writing paper, and a tolerably good pen, and a spoonful of ink. That was not, certainly, what Lord Palmerston meant; but that his opportunity would be when a conversation might be conveniently and naturally introduced, whilst he should be in private interview with the Spanish Minister; that it should be when he had an opportunity of speaking with the Minister of Spain, and talking over the matter in that delicate and discreet way which was likely to effect his object without giving offence.’

Perhaps Palmerston’s inherent abrasiveness was to blame. Peel was thus convinced that the affair had been mishandled. Language was important, because the Spanish ‘are a gallant nation, peculiarly jealous of independence — sensitive upon the point of honour’. If Palmerston wished to achieve his goals, then ‘it would have been wiser to have held different language’, rather than what Peel perceived as ‘an abruptness in the original letter’ twinned with ‘expressions assuming a tone of superiority which are I think calculated to offend that gallant nation.’ Some interpreted this as inconsistency, and argued Palmerston cynically determined how to proceed based on the power of the target. Not for the first or last time, the FS was accused of pursuing one policy for the weak and another for the strong. Thus Lord Stanley criticised him in the Lords: ‘Why, then, I would ask, do Her Majesty's Government act so differently to France from what they do to Italy, Portugal, and Spain? Is it because France is great and powerful, and because Italy, Spain, and Portugal are weak? Is it because it was safe to interfere with the one, and not so safe to interfere with the other? I know not to what to attribute the inconsistency in the course the Government are pursuing, if not to that motive. I think the tone of Lord Palmerston's note was sufficiently offensive to the pride and dignity of Spaniards.’

But there was also space to criticise the Spanish as well. Had Britain not invested a great deal in establishing the Spanish Queen’s regime in recent years? Did it not behove her to treat Britain with respect, or at least not to assume the worst of her when she offered friendly advice to her erstwhile friend? Clearly the Spanish government did not think so, but as Richard Sheil complained, this reaction from a power Britain had helped so much reflected poorly on the heartless Spanish ingrate, rather than on British honour. Sheil believed that: ‘If a man, calling himself his friend, were in his direst need to fly to him for aid…and if after doing all this, or more than this, seeing that the man for whom he had done so much was rushing again to destruction, he were to interpose, and to exclaim, "For your own sake and for my sake, pause in your race to ruin" – and if instead of thanking him for the advice which he had every right to have given, the man whom he had saved were to turn contumeliously upon him, and strike him upon the cheek – does the hon. Gentleman think that he would be dishonoured?’

Opinions did exist which recommend avoiding war. The Caledonian Mercury adopted a middle course, reasoning that ‘it is well’ that Britain had not taken ‘high offence to the indignity offered to our Ambassador’, and believing ‘to go to war with Spain about the affair would be very ridiculous.’ And yet, ‘the national honour requires that the whole question should be investigated by Parliament’, and what mattered now was whether British interference warranted the Spanish reaction, noting that if Palmerston’s approach was in fact just, then Spain’s behaviour ‘is tenfold aggravated.’ As I noted above, 1848 was a turbulent year for Europe, and once Parliament had its say, Britain essentially focused on more important matters than what the Spanish had done to their ambassador. This is rational, but it does conflict with the supposed rigidity of the HS, and suggests that NH was itself subject to terms and conditions. In the next episode, we’ll see what happens when Palmerston received a similar insult from Greece, yet lacked any of the forbearance he exercised towards Spain here. The act provoked a crisis, but it also propelled Palmerston to the forefront of British politics, and perhaps to the premiership itself. I hope you’ll join me for that, but until next time my name is Zack, thanks for listening, and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Dieter Dowe (ed), *Europe in 1848: Revolution and Reform* (New York, 2001). William Fortescue, *France and 1848: The End of Monarchy* (Oxford, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Palmerston’s letter to Bulwer read as follows: ‘I have to recommend you to advise the Spanish Government to adopt a legal and constitutional system. The recent downfall of the King of the French, and of his family, and the expulsion of his Ministers, ought to indicate to the Spanish Court and Government the danger to which they expose themselves, in endeavouring to govern a country in a manner opposed to the sentiments and opinions of the nation; and the catastrophe which has just occurred in France is sufficient to show that even a numerous and well-disciplined army offers only an insufficient defence to the Crown when the system followed by the Crown is not in harmony with the general system of the country. The Queen of Spain would act wisely in the present critical state of affairs if she were to strengthen her Executive Government by widening the bases on which the administration reposes, and in calling to her councils some of the men in whom the liberal party places confidence.’ Letter of Viscount Palmerston to Sir Henry Bulwer, 16 March 1848. Read by Lord Stanley, HL Deb 5 May 1848 vol 98, cc. 678-679. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brown, *Palmerston*, pp. 281-283. Ministers also upheld the view that Britain’s alliance with Spain from 1834 entitled her to tender advice where Madrid was in danger. As Russell expressed: ‘Considering, then, the obligations of this treaty, and considering the sums of money due by the Spanish Government to England for arms and for the munitions of war; remembering the treaty which obliges this country to make naval efforts for the maintenance of the Queen's Government in Spain; bearing in mind that if called upon we have engaged to make those efforts—it is, I conceive, our right thus to tender advice, and it is natural that we should desire that any danger of disturbing the Government of Spain should not be recklessly incurred; at least, we were entitled to give such friendly advice as appeared to us best calculated to avert civil war. Of this I feel perfectly assured, that that was all that my noble Friend intended; he did not intend any thing like dictation. But this country being in alliance with Spain, he did mean to offer such friendly advice as was consistent with the relative positions of both countries, with the interests of Spain, and with the engagements into which we had entered.’ Lord John Russell, HC Deb 4 May 1848 vol 98, cc. 604-605. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As Charles Babington Macauley had declared: ‘The place of this country among nations was not so mean or ill ascertained that we should trouble ourselves to resist every petty slight which we might receive. Conscious of her power, England could bear that her Sovereign could be called a barbarian, and her people described as savages, destitute of every useful art. When our Ambassadors were obliged to undergo a degrading prostration, in compliance with their regulations, conscious of our strength, we were more amused than irritated. But there was a limit to that forbearance.’ HC Deb 7 April 1840 vol 53, cc. 718-720. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Palmerston was accused of pursuing one policy for the weak and another for the strong. Thus Lord Stanley criticised him in the Lords: ‘Why, then, I would ask, do Her Majesty's Government act so differently to France from what they do to Italy, Portugal, and Spain? Is it because France is great and powerful, and because Italy, Spain, and Portugal are weak? Is it because it was safe to interfere with the one, and not so safe to interfere with the other? I know not to what to attribute the inconsistency in the course the Government are pursuing, if not to that motive. I think the tone of Lord Palmerston's note was sufficiently offensive to the pride and dignity of Spaniards.’ HL Deb 5 May 1848 vol 98, cc. 686-687. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Questions were briefly raised about the necessary correspondence being made available: HC Deb 8 May 1848 vol 98, cc. 760-2; HC Deb 23 May 1848 vol 98, cc. 1259-60; HC Deb 29 May 1848 vol 99, cc. 1-2. Two Lords’ debates in early May also considered the matter, but focused less upon the insult and more upon the error of Palmerston’s style and intention. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For instance, one regional Irish paper considered ‘another week productive of revolutions and insurrections,’ examining the tumult in Vienna and Berlin, and warning of a looming conflict over Schleswig-Holstein between the Germans and Danes. Ireland threatened to revolt, and the French situation dominated attention, but of additional concern was the Chartist movement, which ‘has not yet been completely put down.’ Finally, it cautioned that ‘A very large deficiency in the revenue is expected by those, whose position may be taken as enabling them to form a good opinion of the subject.’ *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier*, 6 June 1848. See also *Liverpool Mercury*, 6 June 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Roger Bullen, ‘Anglo-French Rivalry and Spanish Politics, 1846-1848,’ *English Historical Review*, 89, No. 350 (Jan., 1974), 25-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sir George Bankes, HC Deb 5 June 1848 vol 99, cc. 347-348. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. He also clarified that although ‘the House and the country were prepared to go with him in the vindication of the honour of the country,’ they must first ‘receive full explanation upon the subject.’ *Ibid*, cc. 348-349. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bankes ‘did not think that it would be an honest course for this country to pursue if they were now to rise up with vehement denunciations against the Court of Spain, in accordance with what was no doubt the general feeling of this country, namely, the determination to vindicate its honour, unless they at the same time declared that, so far as they had been in error, they were ready to offer amends.’ *Ibid*, cc. 361-362. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Stanley told the Lords, that ‘knowing what course a man of honour in private life would take under such circumstances,’ he asserted that ‘the course most worthy of a great nation to take would be a frank and fair admission that the interference was unwarrantable, the advice undeserved, and to at once withdraw the offensive expressions.’ Should the government do this, they could ‘safely trust to Castilian honour and Castilian generosity for an immediate and an unequivocal withdrawal of all that might be offensive,’ in the Spanish insult. Lord Stanley, HL Deb 8 May 1848 vol 98, cc. 689-690. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Richard Sheil, HC Deb 5 June 1848 vol 99, cc. 369-370. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ‘If a man, calling himself his friend, were in his direst need to fly to him for aid…and if after doing all this, or more than this, seeing that the man for whom he had done so much was rushing again to destruction, he were to interpose, and to exclaim, "For your own sake and for my sake, pause in your race to ruin" – and if instead of thanking him for the advice which he had every right to have given, the man whom he had saved were to turn contumeliously upon him, and strike him upon the cheek – does the hon. Gentleman think that he would be dishonoured?’ *Ibid*, cc. 370-371. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*, cc. 370-371. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Viscount Mahon, *Ibid*, cc. 373-374. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. He added that ‘there never was an act so offensive in itself, and of such great consequence, undertaken upon such slight grounds.’ *Ibid*, cc. 376-377. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid*, cc. 377-378. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Lord John Russell, *Ibid*, cc. 383-384. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid*, cc. 384-385. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Russell, HC Deb 5 June 1848 vol 99, cc. 384-385. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The previous month in the Lords, Lord Stanley had asserted that Palmerston’s policy of ‘offensive proceedings’ towards Spain, mixed with ‘the most Christian principle of forbearance and forgiveness,’ was one which ‘appeared to him to be little consistent with the dignity of a great Power carrying on a diplomatic correspondence with another country.’ Lord Stanley, HL Deb 8 May 1848 vol 98, cc. 749-750. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Benjamin Disraeli, *Ibid*, cc. 385-386. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid*, cc. 388-389. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid*, cc. 392-393. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid*, cc. 400-401. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Sir Robert Inglis, *Ibid*, cc. 400-401. Inglis also challenged why ‘so long an interval’ was allowed to pass ‘without an effort to restore his position, or vindicate the honour of the country by requiring an apology from the Spanish Government?’ *Ibid*, cc. 401-402. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Lord Stanley engaged with this rhetoric as well, asserting that Palmerston ‘had had his despatch returned as unworthy to be received,’ and ‘he had such an insult put upon him as no one gentleman could receive from another, and such as he believed no other country had ever before suffered.’ Lord Stanley, HL Deb 8 May 1848 vol 98, cc. 749-750. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Earl of Aberdeen, HL Deb 8 May 1848 vol 98, cc. 753-754. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Ibid*, cc. 754-755. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Sir Robert Peel, *Ibid*, cc. 404-405. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Ibid*, cc. 405-406. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Peel, did not necessarily object to the rationale underpinning Palmerston’s note to Bulwer – ‘I don't object to the thing, I do object to the manner in which it was done’ – he was instead convinced that the affair had been mishandled. Language was important, because the Spanish ‘are a gallant nation, peculiarly jealous of independence — sensitive upon the point of honour’. If Palmerston wished to achieve his goals, then ‘it would have been wiser to have held different language’, rather than what Peel perceived as ‘an abruptness in the original letter’ twinned with ‘expressions assuming a tone of superiority which are I think calculated to offend that gallant nation.’ *Ibid*, cc. 406-407. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Ibid*, cc. 408-409. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Viscount Palmerston, *Ibid*, cc. 410-411. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. ‘It was a text upon which Sir H. Bulwer was to speak; but it was not intended, when written, to be presented just in the shape in which it was given in.’ *Ibid*, cc. 411-412. This position was also expressed by Whig allies in the Lords. Lord Brougham had thus explained that ‘When Lord Palmerston recommended Mr. Bulwer, "if a fitting opportunity offers" to do so-and-so, he did not mean that it was to be when Mr. Bulwer should have the rare opportunity of being possessed of a clean sheet of white writing paper, and a tolerably good pen, and a spoonful of ink. That was not, certainly, what Lord Palmerston meant; but that his opportunity would be when a conversation might be conveniently and naturally introduced, whilst he should be in private interview with the Spanish Minister; that it should be when he had an opportunity of speaking with the Minister of Spain, and talking over the matter in that delicate and discreet way which was likely to effect his object without giving offence.’ HL Deb 05 May 1848 vol 98, cc. 700-701. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Ibid*, cc. 416-417. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Ibid*, cc. 417-418. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The *Sun* asked whether there had ever been such a debate ‘which will have attracted an attention so universal and paramount’ as that of 5 June. The *Sun* argued that ‘It was a discussion, in several particulars, without any parallel whatever.’ Yet, while noting the significance of the government taking responsibility for Bulwer’s discretion, the fact that Bankes’ Motion was withdrawn was ‘quite expressive of the opinion entertained upon this quarrelsome correspondence throughout the country.’ The *Sun*, 6 June 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. ‘Never was the public time more wantonly and fruitlessly wasted, nor patriotic indignation more heroically useless, in its virtuous hostility to Spain, since the days when Captain Jenkins was ordered down to the bar of the House of Commons, with one of his ears in his waistcoat pocket.’ *Morning Chronicle*, 6 June 1848. ‘We were really very silly to have been in any pain for Lord Palmerston or Sir Henry Bulwer.’ ‘The fact is, the debate was not a serious one. And of those who joined in it no one seemed to have a higher or more serious object than to make a speech.’ Regarding Disraeli’s contribution, ‘the house was more delighted with the malice than touched by the truth of what he said.’ *Daily News*, 6 June 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The *Globe* interpreted the debate as evidence that ‘no difference has existed between the political leaders of the two great parties in this country with regard to the general principles on which our foreign policy has been conducted towards Spain,’ but made no mention of the insult at the heart of the incident. The *Globe*, 6 June 1848. The *Standard* described Bankes as ‘the advocate of the honour of this country, which requires that the unprecedented affront that we have sustained be submitted to with a candid acknowledgement of its justice, if it have been justified by adequate provocation, or indignantly resented if it have been wrongful.’ Yet, it spent greater attention on the ‘curious’ support given by Peel to the government’s position, than on the Spanish insult itself. *London Evening Standard*, 6 June 1848. The *Caledonian Mercury* adopted a middle course, reasoning that ‘it is well’ that Britain had not taken ‘high offence to the indignity offered to our Ambassador’, and believing ‘to go to war with Spain about the affair would be very ridiculous.’ And yet, ‘the national honour requires that the whole question should be investigated by Parliament’, and what mattered now was whether British interference warranted the Spanish reaction, noting that if Palmerston’s approach was in fact just, then Spain’s behaviour ‘is tenfold aggravated.’ *Caledonian Mercury*, 8 June 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Morning Post*, 6 June 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. The *Era*, 4 June 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Leeds Times*, 10 June 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *The Times*, 7 June 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *The Times*, 8 June 1848. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Bulwer’s diplomatic career continued with the significant 1850 Clayton-Bulwer Treaty: Richard W. Van Alstyne, ‘British Diplomacy and the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, 1850-60,’ *Journal of Modern History*, 11, No. 2 (Jun., 1939), 149-183; G. F. Hickson, ‘Palmerston and the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty,’ *Cambridge Historical Journal,* 3, No. 3 (1931), 295-303. Bulwer also served as Russian ambassador following the Crimean War: Laurence Guymer, ‘A Question Presenting a Host of Difficulties: Sir Henry Bulwer, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe and the Danubian Principalities, 1856–1858,’ *History*, 96, No. 321 (Jan 2011), 26-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Helge Berger and Mark Spoerer, ‘Economic Crises and the European Revolutions of 1848,’ *Journal of Economic History*, 61, No. 2 (Jun., 2001), 293-326 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Britain did not escape unaffected from 1848. See Miles Taylor, ‘The 1848 Revolutions and the British Empire,’ *Past & Present*, No. 166 (Feb., 2000), 146-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Offer, ‘Going to War in 1914: A Matter of Honor?’, 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Viscount Palmerston, HC Deb 5 June 1848 vol 99, cc. 417-418. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)