The Open Door Policy

When I started my research on the Open Door Policy I assumed that there would be several opposing views, but was surprised to find that some of the views were vastly different. Some historians see our policy as the scheming work of the British government who duped America into authorizing it, and others see it as the work of big business interests in America. While both of these may be true, a combining of all the views may bring a clearer and more objective picture.

The first view of England being the main power behind our Open Door Policy comes from the works of George F. Kennan and A. Whitney Griswold. After the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, Europe descended upon China like a "Living Carcass." Great Britain's dominance was now challenged by her three great rivals: Germany, France, and Russia. Since 1840 England had been a leader in exploitation of China and they now controlled 80% of all China's total foreign trade. England for many years had always been firm advocates of the open door policy and her only motives now were to stay the advances of her rivals and protect her own economic stake in the Far East by whatever means seemed most practical, and with whatever nation they could coerce to come to their assistance. Her only hope was if her competitors could be persuaded to open their spheres of influence to British commerce on the open door principle, but she needed an ally.

On January 17, 1898 they extended their first feelers for an alliance with Russia, but this failed, so they turned to the United States. There are three different opinions on what happened next: Griswold says that all kinds of overtures, official and unofficial were made to the U.S. to bring us into an alliance with England in the Far East. Kennan says that England made only one formal approach to the United States government asking for their assistance. They were not against spheres of influence, only against annexations or leases of territory under conditions that would exclude the trade of other countries. Thomas A. Bailey said that twice in 1898-1899 England proposed to Washington a co-operative arrangement to insure equal commercial opportunity in China. The request came at a time when McKinley was preoccupied with Spain and they rejected the proposal bluntly stating that it was inconsistent with the traditional nonentanglement policy of the U.S. McKinley said:

"Although they were not unmindful of the situation in China and its possible effect upon American trade interests, all their advice up to the present time indicates no foreign occupation which interferes with that trade or aims at exclusive commercial privileges."
Kennan says that England did not much care about the United States's response, and as the U.S. did not even have a Department of Far Eastern Affairs, when they were turned down the matter was never brought up in a formal way by England again. But John Hay, who was ambassador to London was interested in the matter from the standpoint of U.S. relations with England. He knew nothing about China, but felt the U.S. was unwise not to be sympathetic to England and build up some diplomatic credit that we could draw on later. The British were actually slipping farther away from the Open Door Policy in their actions in China and probably wanted to forget about it.

In China the Imperial Maritime Customs were collected by the Englishman, Sir Robert Hart, and it was one of China's chief revenues. At this time the British were trying to avoid paying the customs in one of their chief cities and Hart was very worried that other countries like Russia would follow England's example. At this time Englishman Hippsley, who was second in command under Hart, came to the U.S. to talk with Hay. He urged that the American government do what it could to maintain the Open Door for ordinary commerce in China.

In 1898-1899 Beresford, an Englishman, made a tour through the U.S. in which he tried to push a joint agreement with England and later wrote The Break-up of China as much for America as for England. England's courting of American favor during the war with Spain strengthened the belief that British and American interests in the Far East were identical, and Germany and Russia were their common enemies. The idea of equal commercial opportunity began to meet with increasing favor in American mercantile and Missionary groups. The pressures on the State Department finally became so strong that some kind of official gesture became imperative.

Hay sent the Open Door Notes on September 6, 1899 to Berlin, London, St. Petersburg, Tokyo, Rome, and Paris. The main body of the notes were taken directly from the writings of Hippsley and its main points were:

1. Within its sphere of interest or leasehold in China, no power would interfere with any treaty port or any vested interest.
2. The Chinese treaty tariff would be applicable within such spheres of interest, and the duties were to be collected by the Chinese government.
3. Within its sphere no power would discriminate in favor of its own nationals in the matter of harbor dues and railroad charges.

Each nation was urged not only to subscribe to these principles but to use its influence to secure acceptance by the others.

Replies were long in coming and each contained some qualification. The one exception was Italy which had no sphere of influence and had failed to get one.
Most said their acceptance was contingent upon unqualified approval by the others. Russia's response was in effect an evasive declination, which meant that the other powers giving qualified answers were released from their commitment. On March 20, 1900 Hay announced that they had received final and definitive word from the other nations giving the American public the impression that the European powers, who had been on the verge of getting away with something improper in China, had been checked and frustrated by the timely intervention of the United States government and that a resounding diplomatic triumph had been achieved.

Kennan says that the wording of the notes express the desires of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service at that particular moment and that it was largely aimed at Britain and by getting our government to sponsor it, Hippisley had found a way of forcing the British to pay their taxes. But Hay didn't realize this or how much this policy would conflict with Britain at this particular moment. The document is a highpoint in American diplomacy, an example of benevolent impulse accompanied by energy and shrewd skill in negotiation. Not one of the statesmen and nations that agreed to Hay's policy wanted to.

Bailey felt that the Open Door Policy was merely a dramatic statement of Hay's policy, based primarily upon commercial rather than unselfish motives. The policy was designed for America's trade rather than China's rights. It did not become legally binding upon the powers because they did not all accept it. As far as America was concerned, it was a pious hope rather than a stern international reality.

Soon after this the Boxer Rebellion took place in China and, Hay fearful of the carving up of China by the vengeful European powers, sent out another circular on July 3, 1900. In the Open Door notes Hay mentioned the desirability of maintaining the integrity of China, but had not stressed this point. The U.S. now wanted to preserve Chinese territorial and administrative structure as an entity, and safeguard for the world the principle of equal and impartial trade with all parts of the Chinese Empire. Hay had learned his lesson, and unlike the original notes, this one did not call for an answer. He merely proclaimed America's policy. Yet the powers, suspicious of one another's greed, found it to their advantage to pay lip service to the expanded doctrine. It only survived because on one contested it, and it was scarcely noticed outside our own country.

Ironically, a few weeks later the Japanese asked America if they would help her forcibly remove Russia from her encroachment in Manchuria to assure the observance of its principles. Hay replied that the U.S. was:

"not at present prepared to enforce these views in the east by any demonstration which could present a character of hostility to any other Power."
The Japanese took this to heart, made an alliance with England, and threw Russia out of Manchuria.

The U.S. also proved to be a poor example when they closed the door in the Philippines and secretly tried to enter the territorial scramble in China. In November 1900 the U.S. tried to get a territorial concession at Samsah Bay in southern China, but the Japanese thwarted this.

Bailey says that the Open Door Policy might have been effective if the British and Americans had of allied to uphold it, but as at the time of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, their interests ran parallel. As in 1823 Anglophobia still ran high and America did not want to get involved in entangling treaties.

The opposing view to the main emphasis behind the Open Door Policy is one that is often overlooked. Special business interests in the U.S. were concerned over the possible loss of the Chinese market, and were eager to have the government take action. While the Chinese market only amounted to 2% of America's foreign trade, it was one that had tremendous potential. China was given first attention as she was the most promising field for American enterprise, industry, and capital. Access to their markets, under conditions which would secure equality of opportunity to the U.S. would result in immense gains to our manufacturers. Therefore, it was mandatory to prevent Japan and the European powers from excluding the U.S. in China.

Charles S. Campbell, Jr. and William Appleman Williams were my main sources for material in this area.

Williams said that American diplomacy revolved around three areas:

"Imperialists led by Theodore Roosevelt, anti-imperialists led by William Jennings Bryan, and businessmen and intellectuals who opposed traditional colonialism and advocated instead the policy of an open door for America's overseas economic expansion. The Open Door ended the debate between imperialists and anti-imperialists. When combined with the ideology of an industrial manifest destiny, the history of the Open Door Notes become the history of American foreign relations from 1900 to 1958."

Campbell saw there being two special interest groups. The first was the American-China Development Company, a corporation founded in 1895 to get railroad concessions in China. The second group were American exporters of cotton goods. Cotton was our chief export to China, and that country provided by far the largest market for American cotton mills. From 1887 to 1897 our cotton exports to China had increased 120%, so Americans attached a large importance to this rapid growth of exports. China was considered in wide circles to be potentially the greatest market in the world.
While the French, Germans, and Russians were advancing on China, Secretary Sherman stated that he did not see any likelihood of partition, at least not for some time. This combination of encroachment on Chinese soil and evidence of what they took to be disinterestedness on the part of the State Department so alarmed some of those with financial interests in China that they determined to take action. A "Committee on American Interests in China" was founded. During the Spanish American War, the "American Asiatic Association" was founded in 1898 to look after American trade.

While money and interest in China were all available, many businesses were too cautious. Paul S. Reinsch said that the success of the Open Door Policy depended on the activities and initiative of American business and finance. Governments can hold doors open all over the world, but if there is no one to go through them, it is an empty form. When businessmen did visit China, they often ruined valuable concessions by making petty and excessive demands for security which unnecessarily antagonized the Chinese and delayed the negotiation of contracts.

When the Open Door Policy went out this was the exact thing that the special interests had been working for. To the cotton exporters the notes meant that their market appeared to be far more secure; and to the American-China Development Company this meant that there was much to be hoped for from a grateful China, and indeed a few months later the company at last secured the contract which it had so long been seeking.

To Williams the Open Door Policy was to extend the American system throughout the world without the embarrassment and inefficiency of traditional colonialism. It has come to be a necessity to find new and enlarged markets for our agricultural and manufactured products, and we could not maintain our present industrial prosperity without them.

What were some of the world’s responses to our Open Door Policy? The Boston Transcript said: "We have an infinitely wider scope in the Chinese markets than we should have had with a 'sphere of influence' in competition with half a dozen other spheres." Many European commentators acknowledged that the strategy "hits us in our weak spot." A Berlin paper said: "The Americans regard, in a certain sense, all China as their sphere of interest."

A presentation given by Laura Entz for a class assignment at Biola University. This is not an official paper - merely an oral presentation.