

# CONGO CRISIS - - - - 1880 STYLE

By MR. ROBERT EPLER

Since the summer of 1960, the pronunciation of names such as Adoula, Tshombe, Lumumba, and Gizenga has caused consternation among American statesmen, news commentators, students, and other interested citizens. These people have dusted off their atlases in search of Aruwimmi, Katanga, Ituri, Tumba, and Itimbiri. To many, the current Congo difficulties have been a revealing lesson in contemporary politics and geography—their first brush with a remote corner of the globe. A few, who had dug deeper than the daily papers and weekly news periodicals, were surprised to discover that Congo crises are nothing new and that their great-grandfathers were showing considerable concern over the Congo's problems back in the 1880's!

While the Congo question of that day did not bear the grave international implications that are present in that area today, the economic and political fortunes of several major powers were involved and feelings ran quite high for some time. Even the United States managed to view the situation with some alarm and became involved to an unusual extent, considering the basic isolationist policy contemporaneous to that era.

Through the first seventy years of the nineteenth century, there was little European interest in sub-Saharan Africa. The British, Spanish, French, and Portuguese already possessed sizeable holdings but showed no enthusiasm for expanding them. This apathy was to dissolve rapidly under the impact of the dramatic accounts of the journalist-explorer, Henry M. Stanley. After his successful search for Dr. David Livingstone in 1871, Stanley gained worldwide fame which aroused much frantic interest in the Dark Continent. Stanley himself returned to Africa to locate the Congo River's headwaters and make the tortuous journey to its mouth on the Gulf of Guinea. With their appetites for empire heightened by Stanley's adventures, several European powers set out to carve huge chunks of mysterious Africa into additional colonies. By the end of the century, all Africa was under colonial administration with only two exceptions—Liberia and Abyssinia (Ethiopia).

Seeing the great economic possibilities, Belgium's King Leopold II called an international conference of explorers, geographers, and various technical experts to meet in Brussels. Out of this meeting came the African International Association with Leopold at its head. An American, Henry S. Sanford, who had served as minister to Belgium during the Civil war, was on the executive committee. The A.I.A. dispatched Stanley to Africa for yet another expedition. This time, his task was to make treaties of cession and protection with native chieftains. By 1883, the A.I.A. had changed its name to International Association of the Congo, had created its own flag (a single gold star on a blue field), and had established forty-five "missions" in the Congo under more than a hundred agents.

While the I.A.C. operated under the guise of a private organization, several interested nations were

suspicious of its motives and envisioned a vast Belgian grab of land. France immediately sent its noted explorer, De Brazza, to survey north of the Congo River. Portugal revived ancient claims to the river's mouth and sought British backing for its stand. Other nations—Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United States—sent ships to the Congo on various pretexts. The American vessels were instructed to make harbor soundings and to seek "a healthful site for commerce."

As the private domain of the I.A.C., the Congo lacked any true legal status and was ripe for the encroachments of neighboring colonial powers. Leopold and Sanford realized that the only way to preserve their holding was to have the I.A.C.'s sovereignty recognized by an important power. Which one would it be? Without much hesitation, the I.A.C. looked to the United States as its savior. Stanley's popularity, the earlier experiment in Liberia, America's expanding economy, and the possibility of using the Congo as a haven for freedmen headed the list of reasons for possible American sympathy.

Sanford sailed home to conduct an intensive lobbying campaign. His persuasive techniques met with considerable success. President Chester Arthur urged American recognition of the I.A.C. in his annual Congressional message of 1883. In May, 1884, such recognition was granted and an American consul, William Tisdell, who had gained some fame as an explorer of the Amazon Valley, was sent to the Congo. Most of the European nations followed America's precedent within the following two years. The United States of America saved the International Association of the Congo!

Many problems remained. Jealous eyes were still being cast toward the Congo and disputes between colonial powers were cropping up in other parts of the continent. In an effort to solve such disputes and also to preserve his own nation's claims, Otto von Bismarck of Germany called an international congress to meet in Berlin, November 15, 1884. The United States was invited and an observer, John A. Kasson, minister to Germany and an avid imperialist, was appointed by the Department of State. His instructions specifically limited his role to one of observing and of discussing a few non-controversial topics. However, Kasson's penchant for empire prompted him to overstep the bounds of his instructions and to sign the final declaration of the congress. This statement solidified the Congo's status and set up rules for the settlement of subsequent African disputes.

American reaction to Kasson's signing was generally unfavorable. Such action was not in accord with the traditional policy of non-intervention in European affairs. A Congressional committee rebuked Kasson's conduct. Most of the press indicated similar dissatisfaction. The new American president, Grover Cleveland, urged the Senate to withhold ratification of the Berlin Congress' declaration. Cleveland's advice was taken and America's active interest in the Congo affair came to an abrupt halt.

(Continued on Page 4, Column 3)