01 PRIVATE LETTER
3 October 1898
Lord Salisbury
British prime minister



Salisbury writes to the Queen

While the diplomatic exchanges with France were still private, British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury wrote to Queen Victoria about the possibility of offering France territory. He described what he thought people in Britain would accept.

> *"No offer of territorial concession on our part would be endured by public opinion here."*

02 PUBLISHED DISPATCHES
10 October 1898

The negotiations go public

Salisbury released a Blue Book: a collection of diplomatic messages exchanged by Britain and France. Anyone reading it could now see both France's claims and the British government's demand that France leave Fashoda.

Diplomats normally waited until talks had ended before publishing such papers. This time, the talks were still under way.

03 NEWSPAPER COMMENTARY
10 October 1898

The Times responds

On the day the Blue Book appeared, The Times argued that publishing the diplomatic papers had narrowed Britain's options:

> *"One side or the other will have to give way. That side cannot, after the publication of these papers, be Great Britain."*

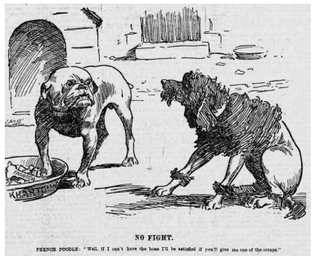


ILLUSTRATION
British cartoon: 'No Fight'.
Original publication unverified; not attributed here to The Times.

04 PUBLIC SPEECH
12 October 1898

A rival backs Salisbury

Lord Rosebery was a prominent Liberal and a political opponent of Salisbury. In a public speech, he backed the British government's position on Fashoda.

Rosebery reminded his listeners that an earlier warning to France about the Upper Nile had been issued under his own administration. He said a government that retreated from the policy would not last a week.

05 CABINET DISCUSSION
27 October 1898

A compromise on the table

The French ambassador proposed a sequence: France would recall Marchand from Fashoda. Britain would then offer talks that might secure France a foothold on the Nile. Each government could present its own move as voluntary.

Salisbury took the proposal to his cabinet. He was inclined to accept it. His cabinet rejected the proposal and chose naval preparations instead.

06 CABINET ORDER
28 October 1898

The fleet receives its order

The British cabinet ordered the fleet to mobilise, that is, to prepare for possible war. The difference in the size of the two navies was not news in Paris: Britain's advantage had been known before the confrontation at Fashoda.

The order put preparations in motion. It was not a declaration of war.

07 PUBLIC SPEECH
28 October 1898

An unexpected supporter

Britain's Liberal Party was divided on imperial affairs. Sir William Harcourt, a prominent Liberal, had criticised Britain's earlier warning to France about the Upper Nile.

When he spoke publicly on 28 October, Harcourt nevertheless supported the government's position on Fashoda. His backing followed that of Lord Rosebery earlier in the month.

17 NAVAL COMPARISON
1895 and 1898

The balance at sea

In 1895, when the Marchand mission was approved, the British fleet totalled about 780,000 tons, compared with about 310,000 for France.

By the time of the Fashoda crisis in 1898, Britain had over 900,000 tons to France's roughly 420,000. Both fleets had grown. Britain's fleet was more than twice the size of France's in both years.

08 DIPLOMATIC LETTER
17 March 1897

Before the crisis

More than a year before British and French troops met at Fashoda, a French agent in Cairo wrote to the French foreign minister. He considered what Britain might do if a French expedition reached the Upper Nile.

In his assessment, Britain would face a choice: make concessions or risk war. He thought war unlikely and expected France to be able to weigh whatever concessions Britain offered.

09 AMBASSADOR'S ASSESSMENT
10 October 1898

Two readings of the Blue Book

Baron de Courcel, the French ambassador in London, hoped the British public might calm down after reading both sides of the dispute in the newly published diplomatic papers.

Yet in a letter to French Foreign Minister Delcassé that same day, he raised the opposite possibility: by stating its demands so openly and firmly, the British government might have made retreat impossible.

10 DIPLOMATIC DISPATCH
20 October 1898

Could it still be a bluff?

Geoffray, a French diplomat in London, wrote to Delcassé. Britain's opposition Liberals, he reported, sounded at least as unwilling to compromise as the government's own supporters.

Geoffray did not take all this language at face value. He suspected bluff, discounted a hard-line minister's speech as typical of the speaker, and still hoped the mood would moderate.

11 PRIVATE LETTER
21 October 1898

What Courcel reads in London

Courcel had hoped that British hostility would subside. Writing to his fellow French diplomat Geoffray, he instead described what he had been reading in the press and hearing from the cabinet:

> *"The tone of the English newspapers, which have again become so acrimonious for some days, the same tone that members of the cabinet have adopted in their public discourse, disturbs me and frightens me."*

12 REPORT FROM FASHODA
22 October 1898

The report reaches Paris

Delcassé had said he would not recall Marchand until he received the expedition leader's own report on conditions at Fashoda. Messages from the isolated post took weeks to reach Paris.

Marchand's report arrived on 22 October. The French government did not order him to withdraw that day.

13 AMBASSADOR'S DISPATCH
26 October 1898
Baron de Courcel
French ambassador in London



What could Salisbury concede?

In a letter to Delcassé, Courcel distinguished between what Salisbury's government might want and what it could publicly defend. He thought it wanted peace but feared accusations of weakness.

The fiercest declarations of patriotism, Courcel noted, were coming from the government's political opponents. In his assessment, that made the British government's position still more difficult.

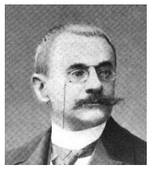
14 AMBASSADOR'S DISPATCH
28 October 1898

Courcel reports to Paris

Writing from London, Courcel offered Delcassé his assessment of how Salisbury was using opinion in Britain. He linked the prime minister's public position to the possibility of talks while Marchand remained at Fashoda:

> *"Lord Salisbury has entrenched himself in English public opinion thereby preventing his government from negotiating as long as French forces occupied Fashoda."*

15 MINISTERIAL INSTRUCTIONS
29–30 October 1898
Théophile Delcassé
French foreign minister



One final offer

On 29 October, after Britain had restated its demands and begun naval preparations, Courcel advised Delcassé that France now faced a choice between war and withdrawal.

That same day, Delcassé instructed Courcel to propose another compromise. The following day the minister reversed his instruction: he now considered it "useless" to make the offer.

16 CABINET DECISION
1–3 November 1898

France recalls Marchand

The French cabinet in office during the crisis had fallen. A new cabinet took office on 1 November. Two days later, at Delcassé's urging, it voted to recall Marchand from Fashoda.

Paris did not obtain the territorial concession it had sought in return. The French decision to withdraw was unconditional.

18 DIPLOMATIC VISIT
15 October 1898

Would Russia help?

Russia was France's ally. During an October visit to Paris, its foreign minister reportedly told the French that Russia would not intervene against Britain over Fashoda.

There had been little encouragement before the crisis either. When the tsar proposed an international conference on arms limits, he did not raise the dispute over Egypt that France wanted to discuss.

19 NEWSPAPER COVERAGE
5–8 October 1898

Le Matin changes its tone

Le Matin, a Paris paper close to the French Foreign Ministry, rejected retreat on 5 October. Its headline began "No!" On 7 and 8 October it argued that France could leave Fashoda without sacrificing national honour. The British ambassador reported the change to Salisbury in London.

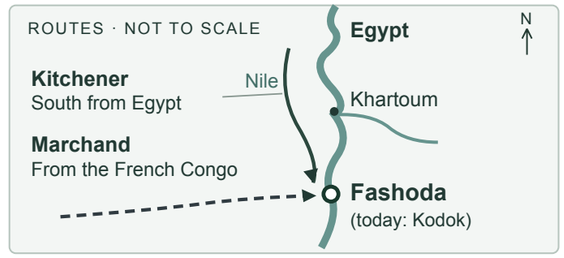


ILLUSTRATION
French cartoon: France as Little Red Riding Hood, Britain as the wolf.
Original publication unverified; not attributed here to Le Matin.

A MAP
The Upper Nile · 1890s

Where was Fashoda?

Fashoda, now Kodok in South Sudan, lay on the Upper Nile. Britain sought control of the river south of Egypt; France wanted access from the west. The Mahdist state ruled much of Sudan. An Anglo-Egyptian army was campaigning against it.



B DIPLOMATIC WARNINGS
1895–1897
Gabriel Hanotaux
French foreign minister at the time of the warning



Britain warns France

In 1895, a British foreign affairs official warned that Britain would regard a French expedition to the Upper Nile as "an unfriendly act". In December 1897, Prime Minister Lord Salisbury told Gabriel Hanotaux that Britain would not recognise another European power's claim in the Nile Valley.

Paris knew that London objected. Neither warning specified what Britain would do if French troops actually arrived.

C EXPEDITION
1896–July 1898
Jean-Baptiste Marchand
Commander of the French expedition



Why send a small expedition?

Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand led a French expedition east from the French Congo. In July 1898, his force reached Fashoda and raised the French flag.

Paris did not expect Marchand to defeat a British army. It hoped a French presence on the Nile would bring Britain and other powers to a conference on colonial claims. By the time the expeditions met, other powers had shown little interest.

D ENCOUNTER
September 1898
Herbert Kitchener
Commander of the Anglo-Egyptian force



Two commanders meet

After defeating the Mahdist army at Omdurman on 2 September, General Herbert Kitchener continued south along the Nile. At Fashoda he found Marchand already there with roughly 120 Senegalese soldiers. Kitchener arrived with about 2,000 troops.

The two commanders greeted each other courteously. Neither opened fire, but neither government abandoned its claim. What happened next depended on decisions in London and Paris.

E BARGAINING POSITION
September 1898

What could France get for leaving?

French Foreign Minister Théophile Delcassé expected Marchand to leave. In return he hoped for land in the Bahr-el-Ghazal region and access to the Nile. Geoffray, a French diplomat in London, thought Salisbury was open to negotiation.

Britain insisted that France withdraw without a concession.

> *If Paris already expected Marchand to leave, what did French ministers change their minds about?*