THE QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY:
GERMAN AND AMERICAN RELATIONS DURING
THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1848

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

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MUNCIE, INDIANA

JULY 2010
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To My Father, John Edward Short, and My Mother, Kimberly Lynn Short.

To Christopher Andrew Atkinson, my best friend and worst/most helpful critic.

To Matthew Robert Smith, my eternal inspiration.
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On May 18, 1848, a national assembly, containing delegates elected by the people, convened in the Paulskirche at Frankfurt am Main. The various German regions tasked this assembly with creating a unified German nation. Numerous historians have considered the Frankfurt Assembly a failure since it could not successfully unify the German states. It has been suggested that the delegates of the assembly were naïve and idle in their pursuit for legitimacy.¹ This study, however, argues that the delegates faced a difficult task but went about achieving their goals in a systematic fashion. The delegates needed to write a constitution while simultaneously obtaining international recognition as the official governing authority of the German people. The two goals were interrelated because if the assembly did not gain legitimacy, then neither would its constitution. The delegates recognized this situation and correspondences with the United States (US) indicate that, through short-lived American recognition and subsequent negotiations, the assembly was systematic in its endeavor to achieve sovereignty and unify the German states.

The historiography surrounding the Frankfurt Parliament consists mainly of harsh criticism due to the delegates’ alleged lack of action. The assembly possessed several attributes that convince historians its existence was merely an academic exercise. A

majority of the delegates held university degrees and worked as professors. The men also had diverse political views and backgrounds. Brian Vick notes that the delegates all had a sense of a national past, but with a personal twist. This led to rigorous debate and often legislative deadlock. Instead of a real parliament, historians charge the delegates with creating a philosophical forum. Jonathan Sperber attributes the failure of the assembly to its lack of action. This characterization of the assembly is not new. It began during 1848 with the disappointment Karl Marx and Frederick Engels felt towards the assembly for not being revolutionary enough. Radicals argued that the assembly acted too cautiously. According to Marx, a revolution should be guided by passion and violence. However, the delegates at Frankfurt had many reasons for why they appeared conservative. Debates surrounding German unification were quite divisive. The delegates could not act collectively until they resolved fundamental national issues. For a new German nation to be created, the delegates needed to act as one unit. Matthew Levinger and Vick agree that religious and ethnic differences hindered the progress of the delegates.

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2 Ozment, 172. Ozment explains that eighty percent of them were in law.
3 Brian Vick. *Defining Germany.* (Cambridge: Havard University Press, 2002), 10-11. Vick writes, “Deputies thereby touched on their understandings of nationality, but also on their self-understandings, as they attempted to construct not just a national identity but other group, cultural, and personal identities as well.”
4 Sperber, 267. Sperber writes, “[This] is attributed to personal failures of the revolutionary leaders, who appear as blowhards and big mouths, able to talk a good revolution but frightened by the daring and bloodshed required for effective action.” See also Ozment, 174. Ozment writes, “Germany’s many heads of state believed the Frankfurt Assembly to be a tower of Babel rather than any clarion call to nationhood.”
6 Matthew Levinger. *Enlightened Nationalism.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 223. See also Vick, 109. Vick writes, “[…] early nineteenth century German culture of nationhood […] roofed a national mansion having many rooms.” Vick refers to the policy of inclusion that the delegates ultimately took in order to prevent alienation. However, accommodation often times produced more rigorous debates.
The delegates are considered failures because they could not concisely define German nationality. Yet, one needs to recognize the seriousness of their task. The delegates attempted to create a definition of what it meant to be German. This problem had plagued various intellectuals, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Ernst Moritz Arndt, for centuries. Even when Otto von Bismarck forced unification in 1871, the question remained. The delegates should be recognized for their sensitivity and determination to solve this vexing issue. They realistically believed that a German nation could be created based on nationality. This goal proved difficult due to its controversial nature and ultimately hindered the assembly’s progress. Historians focus too much on the ultimate failure of the delegates and fail to appreciate the serious efforts made towards national unity. Some, like A.J.P. Taylor, take the assembly seriously, but only as the ultimate cause of Nazism.  

Taylor’s theory is not uncommon as several historians adhere to it. The problem with this causative analysis is that it places direct blame on the delegates for Nazism occurring. Though some connections can be made, charging Frankfurt as the direct cause for the atrocities of Hitler is unreasonable. 

Not all historians fall into this category. Frank Eyck establishes that the delegates had too many obstacles to overcome. While not dismissing their failure, Eyck presents a positive interpretation concerning the effort made. Hindsight is 20/20 and it is obvious that it would be impossible to incorporate all Germans into one nation during the

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7 A.J.P. Taylor. *The Course of German History*. (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), 68. Taylor writes, “1848 was the decisive year of German, and so of European, history: it recapitualted Germany’s past and anticipatd Germany’s future. Echoes of the Holy Roman Empire merged into a prelude to the Nazi ‘New Order.’”

revolutions of 1848. However, the delegates were caught up in the spirit of 1848 and embarked on the more challenging path. Historians argue that the assembly did not take risks, but attempting to create a German nation was very controversial. This point is especially true considering the delegates’ lack of support. Established powers were threatened by the emerging national identity. Bismarck is celebrated for unifying Germany, but he took the easy path by forcing unification through war; he hid behind his army. Additionally, his unification represented the kleindeutsch solution. Initially, the Frankfurt Assembly adhered to the much more challenging grossdeutsch solution. This choice, while ideal in the abstract, created many obstacles when applied to reality.

The delegates attempted unification through legislation, which is much more difficult considering the different interpretations on how that should be accomplished. Their inability to bring unification has left them with two possible legacies. The delegates are either characterized as insignificant to German history or responsible for Nazism. It is important to note that if they had succeeded, Frankfurt would parallel the importance Philadelphia has in American history. There was a very thin line between success and failure, patriot and disappointment. The Frankfurt delegates desired a more systematic approach in dissolving the old order. These men were not mercenaries but instead were intellectuals who understood that grossdeutsch unification could only be achieved through legislation and not war. Their biggest challenge concerned the lack of recognition from the European Powers.

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*Kleindeutsch* refers to the smaller German solution, where Austria would be excluded. *Grossdeutsch* refers to a Pan-German solution, where all Germans could be unified into one nation.
Wolfram Siemann and Eyck remark that it was not the delegates who failed to turn but rather the surrounding princes.\textsuperscript{10} This assessment is more in line with the argument in this study. How could the assembly succeed when established European powers, internal and external, wanted it to fail? The delegates had a slim margin for success and it grew slimmer the longer the revolution dragged on. The *Ancien Régime* never wanted democracy brought to Central Europe because that would mean a loss of power and territory. Frederick William IV, the King of Prussia, like several monarchs, acted in self preservation. The assembly, for him, existed only as long as the radicals had popular support. Frederick William deftly evaluated the circumstances and waited for signs of waning momentum before he acted against the assembly.

The Frankfurt delegates could not accomplish their goals without the support and recognition of others. Internally, the surrounding Germanic governments continued their business without any regard to Frankfurt. Priscilla Robertson notes that if the assembly had gained the full support of Prussia and Austria, there would be no doubt that the assembly would have succeeded.\textsuperscript{11} Externally, the delegates similarly did not receive support. England, Russia, and France became weary of a strong unified Germany. W.E. Mosse details the reasons why the other European Powers did not support the creation of

\textsuperscript{10} Siemann, 223. See also 218, Siemann writes, “The actors of 1848-9 did not have a single, clearly determinable aim in which they subsequently failed.” See also Eyck, 394. Eyck writes, “Neither the liberals, nor the radicals could command a national movement. The defect lay primarily not in the institution, but in the attitude of the state governments.”

\textsuperscript{11} Priscilla Robertson. *The Revolutions of 1848*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 143. Robertson writes, “These patriots succeeded in calling a parliament of the entire German speaking population of Europe which drafted a constitution for their huge, hoped-for fatherland. If Austria had not chosen to withhold its German subjects from such a combination [...]; if Prussia had not refused to consider the work of mere upstart common citizens, the parliament would not have failed.”
a German nation. They include commercial issues and the fear of a military conflict. However, the most important reason, which Mosse fails to highlight, is ideology; the revolution threatened the existence of absolutism. If Frankfurt had somehow succeeded, without the assistance of Prussia, it would have become a shining pillar of hope to any nationality that desired a nation based on ethnicity, political liberation, and democracy. This unwanted example could have reorganized the power structure of Europe.

This study does not propose that one should disregard the fact that the delegates failed to unify the German states. Instead, it suggests that the reader look a little closer at the actions taken by the assembly. Historians so easily dismiss the delegates as incompetent. For example, Brendan Simms notes that though the delegates had control over military power, it was only in theory. He suggests that the delegates would have never asserted their authority over military affairs. This assertion is incorrect and leads to the overall point of this study. The assembly did actively seek to create a system of defense that would eventually uphold a constitution. The delegates lived in a world where military power defined one’s sovereignty; Prussia was admired because of its military strength. Lawrence Sondhaus notes that the creation of a navy became essential to the mission of the assembly. This study will expand upon this notion and reveal negotiations between Frankfurt and the US that demonstrate the competency of the delegates to not only plan, but also to act upon the solutions produced out of the debates within parliament.

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13 Simms, 180-1. Simms writes, “Yet another political weakness of the revolution was its failure to seize executive power, in particular military power. […] No serious attempt was made to introduce, rather than merely plan, conscription and increased military budget.
Historians dismiss the negotiations between the US and Frankfurt because they had no successful effect on the revolution. However, the negotiations reveal that the delegates were systematic in their endeavor to achieve sovereignty. If the negotiations led to the creation of a new German navy, then, perhaps, the fate of the assembly would have been different. Possibly, with the support of a navy, the delegates could have challenged the supremacy of Frederick William. The main point is that it is not enough to acknowledge these negotiations in a passing sentence, as many historians now do, because they offer another interpretation concerning the revolutions of 1848. The delegates were not naïve, they fully understood the obstacles that they needed to overcome. Their inability to maintain internal unity and obtain external support ultimately led to the failure of the Frankfurt Assembly of 1848.

Since the revolutions began, Andrew Jackson Donelson, known as Old Hickory’s nephew, served as the US Minister to Prussia. Shortly after the assembly first convened, James K. Polk appointed Donelson as US Minister to Frankfurt. From March 1848 through April 1849, when he was dismissed, Donelson constantly informed various US officials of the events occurring throughout the German states. This study utilizes his correspondences in order to shed light on the determination of the delegates to achieve unity. Donelson explains, in detail, the negotiations between the US and Frankfurt concerning the creation of the first German navy. The delegates requested that the US assist by selling them a fully armed war steamer, complete with a US naval officer to train new German recruits. The delegates understood that no government could exist

15 Old Hickory was the nickname given to Andrew Jackson. Some believed that the only reason Donelson received such a prestigious appointment was because of his familial ties with Jackson. Many questioned his ability to adequately perform the duties of a foreign minister.
without a system of defense. They learned this hard fact first hand from the Schleswig situation that will be detailed in the first chapter. In short, an unexpected armistice and resulting blockade of German ports revealed that Frankfurt was powerless without a military presence.

The first chapter explains necessary background information concerning the traditional political structure of Germany. This structure was what made the delegates’ task so difficult. Since absolutism ruled, in order for democracy to be instituted, the structure of government would need to be completely reformed. This fact led to rigorous debates and complex issues that needed to be reconciled before moving forward. Chapter two focuses on the negotiations and agreements made with the US. After producing legislation, the assembly realized that it needed a system of defense in order to protect its authority. Had they succeeded, the outcome of the revolution would have been drastically different. Negotiations fell through in March 1849 when a new Presidential administration took office.

The promise of Frankfurt unraveled quickly when the delegates next turned to Frederick William for support, but it was too late. The delegates had lost all control and the king dissolved the assembly in May 1849. Yet, the assembly’s failure should not be its only legacy. Through the correspondence of Donelson, this study will reveal that the assembly actively sought foreign assistance in order to create a system of defense that would uphold any legislation produced. The assembly was not a philosophical forum but rather a combination of competent men who sought to unite the various states of the German Confederation.
The Frankfurt Assembly sought to construct a nation, but they were working with a faulty foundation. During 1848, no sense of German nationalism existed. Previously, no one nation represented all Germans. The Holy Roman Empire (HRE), created by Charlemagne in 800 AD, claimed to unite the regions it governed; but, in reality, the landscape contained separate territorial rulers that regulated their dominions separately. It is important to understand that Germans had never consciously been united as an ethnic grouping. When the delegates convened in Frankfurt, this disjointed heritage produced many obstacles. First a brief summary of the German past will be discussed. This summary is significant to understanding the seriousness of the task laid before the delegates. Next, this study analyzes the solutions the assembly produced. These solutions led to the need for a system of defense, which is why the delegates sought foreign assistance. This chapter focuses on the challenges facing the delegates; which include the different political factions within the assembly, the lack of internal and external support, and the challenge of defining a German nationality.

The beginning of the nineteenth century marked the end of the HRE. This political entity had loosely connected the Germanic people for over 800 years. The individuals within this empire did not possess a shared political heritage or a sense of nationalism. Only an abstract ideal, loyalty to the emperor, forced the more than 300 estates into cohesion. In 1806, Napoleon Bonaparte would change everything by
destroying this binding factor. Napoleon was a product of the French Revolution, which occurred in 1789. This revolution promoted the idea that the common man deserved active participation within the government. Following the execution of Louis XVI, the revolution transformed from a quest for political liberation into a fight for power. Napoleon defeated opposition and declared himself emperor in 1804. He then set his sights on the rest of Europe.

Napoleon conquered the HRE and weakened both Austria and Prussia. He consolidated the estates into thirty and implemented reforms. His actions greatly transformed the landscape of Europe and, due to the consolidation of power, assisted in later unification attempts. He renamed the territory the Confederation of the Rhine. The boundaries Napoleon created remained until Bismarck forced unification in 1871. For these reasons, Hagen Schulze remarks that Napoleon was the real father of Germany.\(^\text{16}\) This point is true for the political aspects, but not so much for the cultural. Napoleon had successfully separated the Germans into three territories with three different paths of reform. The Confederation of the Rhine followed the Napoleonic Code, Prussia attempted reform with the assistance of Baron von Stein, and Austria simply refused to participate in this age of reforms.\(^\text{17}\) Ultimately, the different Germanic regions became further estranged.

The reign of Napoleon ended in 1815 at the hands of the English, Russian, and Prussian armies. The Confederation of the Rhine remained but the victors renamed it the German Confederation. Though territorial transformation had occurred, political


\(^\text{17}\) See Kitchen, 50-70.
liberation did not. The local princes still considered the German people subjects rather than citizens. The German liberals did not seize the opportunity that the French Revolution presented and returned to the fringes of society. The hopes of creating a single German identity began to lessen as Romanticism and Francophobia could not overcome the diversified German heritage. Prussians remained loyal to Prussia, Austrians remained loyal to Austria, and so on, and so on. The characterization of what it meant to be German became associated with various and, often times, conflicting attributes. Language alone would not be able to answer the question of, ‘What is a German?’ The only other entity that brought some, not all, of the German states together was the Zollverein, or customs union. In 1834, Prussia created it to simplify commerce between the different German regions. However, this only brought the participating states together economically, not culturally. This problem of defining German nationality would plague future attempts at unification.

“Society was cut in two: those who had nothing united in common envy; those who had anything united in common terror.” ~ Alexis de Tocqueville

During the mid-nineteenth century, societal factors led to uprisings throughout the cities and countryside. Rapid industrialization placed a strain on individuals. New technology created different jobs that began to displace individuals from their home and work. To worsen the situation, food shortages occurred due to crop

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18 Romanticists attempted to unite the German states by creating a German cultural heritage through literature and language. Francophobia is a term that refers to the xenophobia Germans felt towards the French during the age of Napoleon.

19 Kitchen, 60-62.
failures. A new era created new hardships and common discontent. Originating in Italy and France, people began to rise up and demand a voice within the government. The revolutions of 1848 gained international recognition following the abdication of King Louis Philippe in Paris on February 24. This revolutionary fervor spread quickly across the German Confederation and entered into Prussia and Austria.

Slowly in the streets of Berlin, individuals began to gather in order to converse about the events occurring throughout Europe. These gatherings quickly transformed from friendly discussions into violent protests. On March 18, 1848, the people insisted that reform be brought to Prussia. This request included a demand that a national parliament be established to create a constitution that would rid Prussia of its absolutist qualities.

Frederick William conceded to the demands of the people. He hoped that the circumstances could be resolved peacefully. However, the ordering of troops into the streets created uneasiness amongst the revolutionaries. Kitchen notes that the garrison commander, who tried to disperse the demonstration, escalated the situation. Violence broke out in the streets and a battle ensued. Over 200 people lost their lives and would forever be remembered as patriots. March 18 became a national holiday not only for the rebels but also the delegates. It reminded people of the lives lost and the freedoms gained. Though many assemblies materialized out of the initial days of conflict, the battle in the streets of Berlin represented one of the most violent episodes.

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21 Kitchen, 75. Kitchen writes, “Only two shots were fired, it was unclear by whom, but that was enough to trigger a bloody street battle. Barricades were erected and by the next day more than 230 people lay dead.”
In response, Frederick William approved of the May Day elections that would create a national parliament. The establishment of assemblies occurred in most of the regions within the Germanic Confederation. Austria created the Vienna Assembly on March 13 and Prussia established the Berlin Assembly on March 18. Both of these parliaments attempted to create a constitution that would bring political change to their respective nations. The Frankfurt Assembly, formed March 31, became the most important because it consisted of delegates who represented the various German regions. This assembly was charged with creating a constitution that would unify all Germans into one nation. However, since Prussia and Austria contained Germans, the delegates at Frankfurt would need to define their supremacy over their counterparts in Vienna and Berlin.

The other two assemblies tended to be more radical than the one in Frankfurt. In Vienna, the delegates declared a Republic that would function independently of the Austrian monarchy. Their insurrection became a warning for any other assembly that wished to declare independence. Austrian officials declared martial law and shut down the assembly. Anyone who protested against these actions could be arrested and summarily executed. These points stood true for internal and external opposition. Frankfurt learned firsthand how seemingly harmless actions could erupt in violence. One delegate, Robert Blum, traveled from Frankfurt to Vienna to observe the circumstances.

23 This occurred in October 1848 after the delegates and people found the new constitution unacceptable. The people once again rose up and carried out violent protest.
24 Declaring martial law became quite common during the revolutions. See Marx and Engels, 138. Marx wrote, “Martial law, like the revolution, is making a round-the-world tour. A large scale experiment has just been made to impose martial law on a whole country.”
While there, he publicly supported the people in their mission to break from the monarchy. Due to martial law, surrounding soldiers arrested Blum.\(^{25}\)

Blum attempted to be released on the basis that he served as a delegate at Frankfurt. This meant little to the Austrian authorities and they executed him. This event revealed that the delegates had little political protection and needed to take caution in their actions. The monarchs would resort to any means necessary in order to safeguard against anarchy.\(^{26}\) Frankfurt could do little to protest because, according to the circumstances, Blum’s execution was justified. When they finally held a funeral for him, the delegates made sure to state that they did not hold it in protest, but rather in remembrance of the delegate. This event is significant because it exposed the inability of the assembly to defend itself. The delegates needed to establish their authority and obtain recognition as the legitimate governing body of the German states if it was to survive.

Even though the Vienna Assembly revealed weaknesses within Frankfurt, it never directly challenged its existence. The Berlin Assembly, on the other hand, threatened the need for an assembly in Frankfurt. Prussia had a German majority and possessed the military strength necessary for the defense of a new nation. It would be essential to the unification of all German nations. The Berlin Assembly had been established for the purpose of writing a constitution that could transform Prussia from an absolutist nation into a constitutional monarchy governed jointly by the king and the assembly. If Prussia


\(^{26}\) Donelson to Duckwitz, Berlin, October 31, 1848. *Ibid.* Donelson wrote, “If the Central Power fails, then the separate states will be in danger of becoming prey to anarchy […].” See also, Donelson to Buchanan, October 23, 1848. *Ibid.* Donelson wrote, “It is through such terrors that the patriots of Germany must march in order to establish the reform made necessary by the prevalence of former abuse and error. But they are not discouraged, and will not be, as long as the work before them continues practicable.”
attempted reform independent of the other German states, then what would be the point of Frankfurt? Likewise, what would be the point of having a Berlin Assembly if Frankfurt was superior?27 This confusion needed to be reconciled before the delegates could move forward with their mission of creating a German Empire.

When examining the constituents within each assembly, it becomes obvious that Frankfurt had the better chance of success. The delegates there realized that they had to be radical enough to gain the support of the people, but not too radical that the king would want to close down the assembly. The situation differed in Berlin. Many of the delegates in the Prussian Assembly did not possess a high education and made rash decisions based on misguided passions. Donelson believed that the men in Berlin were elected not based on political experience but rather for their patriotism displayed on March 18.28 The Frankfurt Assembly, on the other hand, contained a majority of academics, which is why it has been referred to as the professors’ parliament. These men traveled to Frankfurt because the debates there proved more significant to the prospect of unification.

A major issue concerned who had control over foreign affairs and minister appointments. Frederick William wanted to maintain this power, but the delegates at Frankfurt believed it was their right since they sought control of all German affairs. Anton von Schmerling, Imperial Minister of Foreign Affairs at Frankfurt announced:

27 Thomas Fay to Buchanan, Berlin, September 5, 1848. Ibid. Fay wrote, “Which was superior? If that of Frankfurt, the measures of the Berlin Parliament were but a farce.”
28 Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, May 25, 1848. Ibid. Donelson wrote, “You could scarcely have thought it possible that in a country so remarkable as Prussia is for the excellence of her schools [that] there would have been members sent to a convention to establish her constitution, who can neither read nor right.” See also, later on in the same letter, Donelson wrote, “These persons probably acquired confidence of their constituents from the prominent and patriotic part they took at the barricades.”
The time has arrived for the separate German States to suppress their diplomacy, as well with regard to each other, as to foreign nations. If Prussia would not recall her ministers from foreign government, she must at least instruct them to act under the directions or to support the views of the Central Power.29

Surprisingly, Frederick William conceded and deferred Prussian authority to the Central Power. He assured Frankfurt that anything passed in Berlin would be modified to fit the future constitution. This concession to the Central Power shocked several individuals, including Donelson. He expressed confusion on why the king would surrender the sovereignty of Prussia to a government not yet created but under discussion.30

In reality, Frederick William did not frivolously throw away his authority. The king knew what he needed to do in order to retain his throne. Donelson noted that many people believed that the king had become powerless in the face of the revolution.31 In light of all of the freedoms that the assembly intended on granting, such as universal suffrage and freedom of the press, there would be no need for a monarch. Divine Right could no longer be used as a reason for legitimacy. Yet, Donelson and others did not assess the situation correctly. Almost a year later, Frederick William had a private interview with Donelson and informed him that he, the king, had controlled the revolution through his genius.32 Though the king made the comment after the threat of overthrow had disappeared, it is important to note that the king acted in self preservation rather than German unity. For the time being, the Frankfurt Assembly had the relief in knowing that they could debate freely and create a new and possibly democratic government.

29 Fay to Buchanan, Berlin, May 3, 1848. Ibid.
30 Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, May 13, 1848. Ibid.
31 Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, March 30, 1848. Ibid.
32 Fay to Buchanan, Berlin, January 25, 1849. Ibid.
In order to understand the various issues that challenged the assembly in their pursuit for legitimacy, one must first recognize the complex political factions that divided the delegates. Different ideologies existed that greatly affected the future structure of the German states. One reason factions materialized concerns the structure of the Paulskirche. James Sheehan explains that it did not contain separate meeting rooms and individuals with similar opinions convened at inns and bars following meetings.\textsuperscript{33} Splinter groups took the names of the places they met, which complicates any attempt at generalizing the different parties. The difficulty stems from the fact that within each faction existed smaller factions that further divided the group. It differed very much from modern politics within the US; where the majority of politicians give their loyalty to either the Republican or Democratic party. Donelson noted the amount of factions became overwhelming. He warned that the delegates needed to be cautious of encountering “the hazard of new associations, which may prove more destructive than tyrannies.”\textsuperscript{34}

Despite the challenge of generalizing, this study, with the assistance of Sheehan’s previous analysis, intends to do just that. Three distinct groupings emerge when examining debates. One wanted to maintain the king and have a constitutional monarchy. These individuals believed that the German Confederation could not

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\textsuperscript{34} Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, April 1, 1848. National Archives and Records Service.
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transform into a democracy without a step in the middle. This reasoning came from the fact that the German people had been accustomed to absolutism. Another group of individuals believed the German states could successfully make the leap to democracy. They wanted a Central Power to be created in Frankfurt and led by an Executive President who would be elected. Initially, the position of President could be filled by a current prince or king in order to prevent chaos. However, this would only be a temporary solution. Donelson sided with this grouping and began referring to the ‘soon’ to be unified German nation as ‘The United States of Germany.’

Other American politicians shared Donelson’s optimism. John C. Calhoun, who began to question the competency of the French, now placed his hopes in Frankfurt. He wrote, “I have much more hope for [the German states], than France.” His optimism stemmed from his belief that the history and people of the German states gave it an excellent foundation that could foster democracy. His belief in Germans was reasonable, as several German intellectuals had already proclaimed the US to be a model before the revolutions began. In 1822, Friedrich Hegel gave a lecture at the University of Berlin concerning the Philosophy of History. He stated, “America […] is the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the world’s history shall reveal itself. It is a land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber room of Europe.”

On July 8, 1848, Donelson informed Calhoun that speakers in the streets

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36 John C. Calhoun to Thomas Clemson, April 13, 1848. Shirley Cook and Clyde Wilson, ed. *The Papers of John C. Calhoun.* Vol. 25 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 313. Calhoun wrote, “My hopes are centered in Germany. She has the materials of forming a great confederacy […].”
37 Calhoun to Clemson, April, 23, 1848. *Ibid,* 354.
advocated the abolition of the monarchs and the adoption of democracy. He then assured Calhoun that Germany would soon resemble the US. Yet, Donelson’s portrayal of the circumstances was inaccurate, as several critics of the US model existed.

In Berlin, Karl Marx created a newspaper called *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. In an article published on June 7, 1848 Marx wrote, “Nothing can be more confused than the notion […] that the federal state of North America should serve as a model for the German constitution.” Marx resisted the idea that the German situation even remotely resembled the US. He argued that not only did the US encompass a much larger territory than the German Confederation, but it also contained a more homogenous population. He further states, “But in order to federate with other states, Germany must first of all become one state.” Wilhelm Wichmann, a German sculptor, shared Marx’s suspicions. While speaking in the parliament, he declared:

Reference has been made to the example of North America and the belief expressed that what is possible there would also be possible for us. But this example might not be so appropriate. For in North America, there is not the same variation in nationality, language and customs found in the projected confederation. The United States of America have the same interests, the same historical memories and the nationalities united in them, and, this is the main point, are at the same level of development. But that is not the case with us.

Wichmann revealed important challenges that the delegates would face, such as nationality. His suspicion towards democracy was common within the last and most radical grouping. Influenced by Marx, these people argued that a democratic constitutional monarchy would be absurd and impossible to enforce. They suggested that

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39 Marx and Engels, 33.
40 Ibid., 34.
with the king, “all the princes of Germany are to disappear, and a republic, throwing that of North America into the shade, is with its political revolution to affect a social one, reproducing a golden age.” Additionally, they blatantly threatened the life of Frederick William and suggested that he should “rejoice in the privilege, which would have made Louis XVI so happy, of passing the rest of his days with an independent fortune in a foreign land.” For them, the only way to move forward would be to tear down all previous institutions.

These different factions hindered progress because debating became unnecessary. Most delegates decided how they would vote before they ever entered the parliament. This point is true for many modern governments around the world; however, Frankfurt had not yet become an established and organized political entity. Many issues needed to be reconciled before creating a constitution. This led to arguments over tedious details because the delegates wanted to make sure their specific faction received adequate representation. Several historians note that ideas, which could be agreed upon in the abstract, became more difficult when the delegates tried to put them into practice.

In order to move forward, the delegates needed to elect an individual who would serve as a moderator. Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann, a distinguished professor and moderate liberal, suggested that the assembly create an executive provisory government that included “an executive committee of three persons – Prussia naming one, Austria

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42 Fay to Buchanan. Berlin, October 9, 1848. National Archives and Records Service.
43 Ibid.
44 Sheehan, 60.
45 See Sheehan, 76 and Eyck, 388.
one, and the other states, the third.” Dahlmann supported the creation of a constitutional monarchy. His suggestion, according to Donelson, made several individuals look down upon Frankfurt and question its revolutionary spirit. The assembly rejected this suggestion. President Heinrich von Gagern presented another option. He thought that the delegates should appoint someone who was popular among the people. The person they decided upon was Archduke John of Austria. Kitchen notes that the archduke’s courage, wisdom, and speeches transformed him into a national hero. The delegates appointed him to be the Reichsverweser (Reich Administrator) and he accepted.

Donelson noted that the archduke would be there to quell any tensions. The Republicans hoped that he would advance their views. Ultimately, Donelson saw him as being an annoyance. He states, “Liable on the one hand to be assailed by the monarchs for what he will do, and by the Republicans for what he will not do, his position can only increase agitation.”

Donelson did not represent the only opposition to this appointment. Sperber explains that democrats held mass rallies that criticized the assembly for appointing a prince as the head of state. Despite the criticism, the delegates understood that they needed an authority figure to act as moderator until decisive issues were reconciled.

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46 Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, June 11, 1848. National Archives and Records Service. See also, Kitchen, 79.
47 Gagern was elected to be President of the Frankfurt Assembly by his fellow delegates on May 19, 1848. He served until December 16, 1848.
48 Kitchen, 73. See also, 72. Kitchen quotes the archduke as saying, “As long as Prussia and Austria and the rest of Germany, wherever German is spoken, are united, we shall be as strong as the rocks of our mountains.”
49 Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, June 30, 1848. National Archives and Records Service.
The delegates could now tackle the challenge of creating a constitution. If one could be created and ratified, then the delegates would have the foundation for their new nation and would be closer to obtaining legitimacy. In order to understand how to write a constitution, some delegates used the US Constitution as a template. Others even argued that the German government should mimic the US, particularly the relationship between Congress and the President. However, some individuals, such as Calhoun, believed it would do a disservice to the Germans if the delegates imitated the US. In May 1848, Baron von Gerolt asked Calhoun to comment on a proposed German constitution. Calhoun did not believe that his advice would be of much help since he was not familiar with the situation in the German states. He wrote, “Every constitution, to succeed, must be adapted to the community for which it is made, in all respects; and hence no one, in forming a constitution for itself, can derive much aid from that of others.” Calhoun, while confident in the German people, suggested that they should not rely on the advice of foreign nations. He argued that Germans were the only people who understood how to successfully write a constitution that would unify Germans.

This task definitely would not be easy. The delegates had to find solutions to very sensitive issues, such as nationality. Their determination to resolve this undefined

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51 Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, May 5, 1848. National Archives and Records Service. Donelson wrote, “Our Federal Constitution and many of our state constitutions are in the hands of the people here. Studied by judicious and discreet members of the assembly, they will have a salutary influence in laying the foundation of the new institutions of Germany.”
52 Nipperdey, 580.
concept reveals their commitment to unity. During the nineteenth century, people became more aware of their particular nationality and demanded a nation based on that principle. This idea became known as self-determination and contributed to several uprisings. Three such occurrences happened during the existence of the Frankfurt Assembly. The delegates’ response to these events reveals their hypocrisy. One dealt with the Poles. Austria, Prussia, and Russia had already divided Poland into three separate territories during the 18th century. The Poles demanded that they be given their own nation based on nationality. The only way this could happen would be if the nations who had dismembered Poland restored its independence.54 The problem was that neither Austria, Prussia, nor Russia wanted to relinquish the territory. Likewise, a new Poland would go against the new German nation that Frankfurt proposed. Posen contained a German majority and, according to the delegates, should be incorporated with the other German states. Donelson notes that Poland could only retrieve her nationality based nation “through foreign aid and against the resistance of Russia.”55 Therefore, Polish restoration seemed improbable.

The next, and most controversial, issue dealt with the provinces Schleswig and Holstein that lay on the Danish border with Germany. Within Denmark, Schleswig wanted independence based on their nationality. Following the death of the king, the duchy wanted to separate from the Danish Kingdom. Holstein, likewise, did not want to be incorporated into Denmark because it had once been part of the German Confederation. Both territories possessed a German majority. After hearing that the Frankfurt Assembly was attempting to create a new unified German Empire, both wanted

54 Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, March 28, 1848. National Archives and Records Service.
55 Ibid.
to be incorporated. England, Russia, and France did not support the rebels within Schleswig and Holstein. Initially the delegates at Frankfurt considered the *grossdeutsch* solution, meaning they wanted to incorporate all Germans into one nation. Therefore, the assembly openly supported the Schleswig rebels.

However, *grossdeutsch* was the most difficult choice because the current boundary included many non-Germans and territory outside of the boundary included many Germans. If the new boundary was based on German nationality then Prussia and Austria would both lose territory. The delegates would also lose any support from England, Russia, and France if they decided to incorporate Schleswig and Holstein into new territory. No nation wanted another European conflict. Not only could war occur, but it would be nearly impossible to give every nationality its own individual country without having to implement forced migration. These issues contributed to the reason why the delegates could not find external support. Donelson hoped that the delegates would learn from the surrounding circumstances and would take “caution in acting upon the great rights of nationality.”\(^{56}\)

The last issue occurred within Austria. Czech nationalists began to demand independence because they feared being forced into the new German Empire. At a Pan-Slav Congress held in Prague, the Czechs suggested that there should be a pro-Slav reorganization of territories that would be independent of the German government. Some of the delegates at Frankfurt believed that these minor insurrections posed little threat. They argued that the Poles and the Czechs did not deserve their own nations because they had been a part of the Holy Roman Empire and the German Confederation. However, the

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\(^{56}\) Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, April 11, 1848. National Archives and Records Service.
delegates insisted that Schleswig should be incorporated into the new Germany due to its German majority. Prussia supported this decision and supplied military to assist the rebels. Britain and Russia did not approve of Prussia’s actions and influenced Frederick William to make peace. In August, 1848, Prussia signed the armistice of Malmö with Denmark.\footnote{Simms, 181.} It was signed without any recognition given to Frankfurt. This action angered the delegates and, for a moment, they refused to ratify the armistice. They believed that Prussia’s actions were against German interest and unity.

More importantly, no recognition was given to the delegates as being the Central Power. However, since the assembly had no military force to defend itself against Denmark and Prussia’s pledge of peace, they eventually ratified the armistice. This confrontation between the assembly and Prussia seriously hurt the credibility of the delegates. Their inability to defend the authority of the assembly had been exposed. Meanwhile, the influence of Frederick William over the German states remained. The problem stemmed from the delegates strong sense of German culture and their need to base the nation on German nationality. They blatantly denied other nationalities the right to create a separate nation but believed that the Germans deserved a specifically German territory. These beliefs hindered the progress of unity because it became impracticable.

Had the delegates been able to create unification utilizing the *grossdeutsch* solution, they would have been forever memorialized as the founding fathers of Germany. The assembly did not have the resources to support a *grossdeutsch* unified nation. They began to realize the problems associated with basing the nation on
nationality and decided upon the *kleindeutsch* solution.\textsuperscript{58} The delegates still wanted to ensure that the nation they created possessed a German majority. In paragraph two of their proposed constitution it declared, “No part of the German Empire can form one state with non-German countries. [...] If a German country is under the rule of the same sovereign with a non-German one, the relations of the two countries are to be settled according to the principles of a mere personal union.”\textsuperscript{59} Gagern put out the suggestion that since Austria did not have a German majority, it should not be included into this new Germany. In reality, underlying suspicions existed for why the delegates did not want to include Austria. Ever since the murder of Blum and the institution of martial law, the assembly became weary of Austria. Some of the delegates commented, “Austria is determined to prevent the formation of a United Germany.”\textsuperscript{60}

Unfortunately for Gagern and the other delegates, Frederick William did not agree with the decision to cut Austria out of the nation. It is possible that he just wanted to be disagreeable since it should have pleased him to have Austria excluded from the new nation. Austria presented a political challenge to Prussia concerning authority over the German states. Following the revolutions, Prussia, under Bismarck, would unify Germany through force, leaving the Austrian Empire outside of the new German boundary. Therefore, one could conclude that the exclusion of Austria would not be a problem for Frederick William. However, he announced his official reason as being:

> [The delegates] entertain the scandalous idea of separating Austria from the balance of Germany. Instead of making a unit of Germany they propose to curtail her of 15 millions of people, would give up the fine port of Trieste, lose the outlet

\textsuperscript{58} Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, November 4, 1848. National Archives and Records Service.  
\textsuperscript{59} *Ibid.*  
\textsuperscript{60} Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, January 15, 1849. *Ibid.* This letter contained a collection of remarks that had been made by various delegates throughout 1848.
of the Mediterranean, and upon that beautiful region, from Bohemia to the sea, to the oppression of tribes that have no German sympathies.\textsuperscript{61}

If the delegates wished to have Frederick William part of the new Germany, they needed to figure out a way to include Austria.

This need to appease the king revealed a lack of supremacy. Technically, Frederick William gave the delegates governing powers, but in reality he still called the shots. In order to have a chance at becoming sovereign, the delegates needed to work out internal divisions and find external support. Reconciling internal conflict would hasten the creation of a constitution. Obtaining external support would reveal their capacity to properly negotiate with another nation on behalf of the German states, which would justify the existence of the assembly. The delegates did not want to just create commercial ties; they sought naval support. The assembly contacted the US in order to obtain materials that would foster the first German navy. The creation of a military force would give credence to their legislation. This study does not suggest that just one war steamer could have changed the outcome of the revolutions; rather it was the idea that surrounded the acquisition of it. The successful negotiations with the US demonstrated the competency of the delegates. Yet, as things seemed to be falling into place, another obstacle materialized. The king would soon strike against the Berlin Assembly, leaving Frankfurt anxious and uncertain about the future.

\textsuperscript{61} Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, November 5, 1848. \textit{Ibid.}
In the fall of 1848, Frederick William dissolved the Berlin Assembly. This event threatened the existence of the Frankfurt Parliament. According to Donelson, all the assemblies derived their power from the same electoral principle. Frankfurt did not possess an immunity that would protect it from the king’s wrath. The delegates worked under a time constraint; though not verbal, it was implied through the actions of the king. The primary task that needed to be finished was the creation of a constitution. However, in light of the recent blockade implemented by Denmark, the delegates desperately needed to create a system of defense. The blockade cost Germans millions in trade. A new Germany would require a strong naval fleet that could provide protection on the seas. Previously, in the summer of 1848, the delegates officially created the *Reichsflotte*. It would be the first all German navy. By planning the creation of the navy, the delegates revealed their ability to react to a real threat; they were not just naïve idealists. However, as with most debates in parliament, the *Reichsflotte* became very controversial.

At this time, Austria was the only German nation with a naval force. If the *Reichsflotte* represented all Germans, then Austria would no longer be allowed to possess an independent navy. This fact explains why the Austrian monarchy refused a request for monetary support. In the beginning, the Frankfurt Assembly needed to raise money in

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62 Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, November 18, 1848. National Archives and Records Service. Donelson wrote, “Each set of assemblies spring from the same electoral principle, and the force which nullifies the one may soon do the same with the other if not prevented by a superior force.”
order to foster a navy. Lawrence Sondhaus explains that the navy cost six million thalers. Initially, the delegates distributed the costs amongst the states. Most agreed to contribute, but Austria refused. This confrontation was a continuation of the tensions between Frankfurt and Austria, which would never be reconciled. After the Berlin Assembly dissolved, Frankfurt began seeking out foreign assistance in order to create a strong navy. In January of 1849, the Reichsflotte became a priority as the delegates realized they needed to act. Frankfurt contacted the US and asked for naval support. If the delegates could successfully create a strong navy, then protection and legitimacy would be brought to Frankfurt. The delegates recognized the importance of a navy and actively pursued its creation.

What these negotiations represent is how close the assembly came to establishing a representative government within a new German nation. However, shortly after they were made, the negotiations failed and created a domino effect. Before discussing the regression and downfall, it is important to understand the negotiations in detail. Why would the US support a not yet established government? Why did Frankfurt look to the US for support? How come historians consider this interaction to be insignificant? Just because the negotiations failed does not mean that they are unimportant. History is not

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63 Lawrence Sondhaus. “Mitteleuropa zur See?” Central European History 20, no. 2 (June 1987): 125. Sondhaus writes, “Because the Frankfurt Parliament had no powers of taxation, it could only ask the governments of the German states for funding; when the naval committee distributed the responsibility for the six million thalers among the various governments, Vienna received a bill for 1.8 million thalers, a sum twice as large as the customary annual budget of the Vömarz Habsburg navy.”

64 Frederick Engels. Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution. (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 88. Engels wrote that at the beginning of 1849, the delegates finally realized that “its resolutions had the force of law.”

65 Sperber, 266. Sperber writes, “The US was strongly supportive of the revolutionary movement, and US foreign policy endorsed it, but US influence on Europe counted for little in the middle of the nineteenth century.” See also Ozment, 173. Ozment notes in a passing sentence that US recognized Frankfurt, yet no mention of the negotiations appear. This point is true for most works concerning the Frankfurt Assembly.
specifically a story about success; the failures often highlight equally significant points. These negotiations offer another perspective on the effort made at Frankfurt and show that the delegates actively sought sovereignty and took concrete measures to achieve it.

The assembly sent a minister, Friedrich Ludwig von Rönne, to negotiate the purchase of a fully armed war steamer with American officials. He also requested that the US provide an experienced naval officer who would train new recruits. While Rönne acted as the primary representative of the assembly to the US, the US government called upon numerous liaisons to help shape the negotiations. Donelson, already introduced, constantly encouraged President Polk about the strengths of the assembly.\(^6^6\) Thomas Fay, a diplomat and ambassador, replaced Donelson in Berlin when he traveled to Frankfurt. Fay, a realist, did not look optimistically upon the chances the assembly had of achieving unity. Calhoun had been monitoring the revolution since their beginnings and had family members within the German states who constantly updated him on the progress. He would then relay this information to Polk. John Y. Mason served as Secretary of Navy and evaluated whether or not the US should involve itself in the military affairs of Frankfurt. Mason had his own individual within Europe, the American Commodore Foxall A. Parker, who updated him on the overall atmosphere of the revolution.\(^6^7\)

While in Germany, Parker dined with Frederick William and various delegates from the assembly. Parker concluded that it would be pointless for US Naval officers to

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\(^{6^6}\) Donelson knew the chance of success was slight; he convinced the president that slight was worth the effort.

\(^{6^7}\) John Y. Mason to F. A. Parker, December 16, 1848. Department of State, Lexis Nexis Document: ‘H.exdoc.5/3’, 19. He was ordered by Mason to obtain detailed information about what was being requested of the US. Mason wrote, “You will converse frankly and unreservedly with such functionaries [about] what is desired by the government; what service will be expected; for what length of time, and on what conditions; how many and of what rank will they desire the services of officers of the American navy.”
travel to the German states. On January 24, 1849, he wrote, “[…] it seems to me it would be unwise for the officers of the American navy to have anything to do with Germany until the Central Power is established, except in the way of advice.”

Parker’s insight reveals that by January 1849, things had already begun to unravel. His assessment that the US should wait until the Central Power had been established reinforces an earlier point that the king still maintained his power.

The delegates did not have the assurance from the surrounding German states that they possessed supreme authority, but they still negotiated as if their assembly was the undisputed leader of all Germans. The delegates had convinced enough people within the US Government of this point and negotiations commenced. It is remarkable that the delegates believed they could ride out the counterrevolution storm. Their determination was impeccable. Even more remarkable is the fact that the US felt confident in entering into agreements with a power not yet considered legitimate. The negotiations began with Mason in charge of naval affairs. He was in constant contact with Minister of Commerce and Naval Affairs of the German Empire Arnold Duckwitz.

Mason also corresponded with Rönne. On February 6, 1849, Mason responded favorable to the requests of Rönne and assured him the US was flattered that the assembly chose the US Navy for the task of training the German Navy. Shortly after receiving this letter, Rönne informed Mason that an agent would be sent to New York for the purpose of purchasing a war steamer and requested that the US provide an experienced naval officer who would assist in the

69 Duckwitz was appointed in July 1848 and served until the failure of the Frankfurt Assembly in May 1849, which he then returned to his post in Bremen.
70 John Y. Mason to Rönne, February 15, 1849. Department of State, Lexis Nexis Document, 24
selection of the vessel and take command after its building was complete. On February 19, 1849, Rönne wrote, “We have bought the ‘United States.’”

Still the question remains as to why Polk would enter into these negotiations. Throughout his diary, Polk lists the details of the negotiations but never any reason behind his decision to assist Frankfurt. The only reason that can be deduced is that the negotiations stem from his ideology. 1848 was an election year in the US and it is important to understand the US political situation because it greatly affected the result of the negotiations. The Democratic National Platform supported the revolutions in Europe and the fostering of democracy. Though Polk was not running for reelection, he believed in the platform. In his Third Annual Message on December 7, 1847, he noted that the US had been divinely protected in its struggle for democracy. The success of America revealed the flaws with the old institutions in Europe, which were once thought to be divinely appointed. Polk saw Frankfurt as a chance at liberating Germans from absolutism. Ideologically, America had a stake in seeing democracy thrive in Europe. Even the public supported the Germans. Newspapers expressed the belief that America

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73 James K. Polk. “Third Annual Message, December 7, 1847.” The American Presidency Project. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29488 (accessed April 25, 2010). Polk states, “No country has been so much favored, or should acknowledge with deeper reverence the manifestations of divine protection. An all wise creator directed and guarded us in our infant struggle for freedom and has constantly watched over our surprising progress until we have become one of the great nations of Earth.” See also, Andrew J. Donelson to John C. Calhoun, January 8, 1848. Shirley Bright and Clyde N. Wilson, *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*. Vol. 25 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 105. Donelson writes, “The President’s annual message […] will be severely criticized by the European press, [but] we cannot expect monarchs to relish the intimation that our example is a proof that their agency in government ought to be dispensed with.”
could act as a guiding light for Europe. The Democrats encouraged this sentiment throughout their publications.\textsuperscript{74}

Therefore, the Polk Administration eagerly recognized and supported the Frankfurt Assembly. The two nations agreed upon a contract that charged the US with creating a war steamer for the new German navy. Commodore Matthew C. Perry was the chosen naval officer who would oversee the creation and armament of the war steamer.\textsuperscript{75}

It was to be called ‘United States’ and fly the US flag until it arrived at its final destination, where it would be renamed. At this point, the negotiations seemed to be going smoothly. In Germany, the delegates also made progress. The assembly sought reconciliation with the local state governments and continued finalizing the terms of the constitution.\textsuperscript{76} If the navy could be created, then the assembly would be closer to establishing its sovereignty. Unfortunately, problems would soon materialize leading to a complete termination of the negotiations.

The presidency of Polk ended on March 4, 1849; already, on March 1, issues began to appear. Rönne wanted an experienced officer stationed in Germany in order to train new naval recruits. This request was not out of the ordinary; even the US military received foreign training from the French and Prussians in its infancy. However, Polk did not know if he had the authority to allow a soldier of the US to serve in a foreign military. The US Constitution strictly forbade any US soldier entering into a contract

\textsuperscript{74} See Frank Merk. Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 195. He writes, “A theme stressed in all Democratic speeches and editorials was that this revolution was the fruit of seeds planted by the American Revolution of 1776.”

\textsuperscript{75} Perry, more famous for his dealings in Japan in 1854, was a high ranked and well regarded individual within the US Navy. He served in the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War. It is important to note that the US decided to send such a highly esteemed individual to monitor the building of a war steamer.

\textsuperscript{76} Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, December 14, 1848. National Archives and Records Service. Donelson wrote, “There have been at Frankfurt many recent indications that the assembly is putting itself in harmony with the various state governments and is acquiring more and more public confidence.”
with a foreign nation unless given permission by Congress. Mason explained this problem to Rönne and implied that Polk would request that an exception be made for Perry. The thing that Rönne did not understand was that the political atmosphere within the US was changing drastically. Due to his policy of western expansion, Polk had lost favor. He did not feel that Congress would grant such a request and, therefore, Polk never presented the situation to Congress. That was not the only problem. Polk’s policy had also triggered internal sectionalism within the US. The next president would be preoccupied with keeping the nation together and assisting the parliament would be the least of his worries.

The delegates had been misled by the US and wasted valuable time and effort. Polk entered into these negotiations without considering the impact the change in administration would have on the promises made. Once again, the lack of support from surrounding nations undermined their progress towards unifying the Germans into one nation. The inauguration of Zachary Taylor would mark the end of US support. The delegates could no longer deny the fact that they would need the support of Prussia if the German states were to unify. Considering the recent attitude of Frederick William, this prospect was not hopeful. Nevertheless, the delegates continued their mission; not willing to give up while the assembly remained legal.

“Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.” ~ Alfonse Karr Les Guêpes, Jan. 1849
[The more things change, the more they stay the same.]

77 John Y. Mason to Rönne, March 1, 1849. Department of State, Lexis Nexis Document, 27. Mason writes, “You are aware, sir, that by the constitution of the United States ‘no person holding any office of profit or trust under the United States shall, without consent of Congress, accept of any present, emolument, office, or title of any kind whatever from any king, prince, or foreign State.’”
Taylor was inaugurated on March 4, 1849. During his sixteen-month term, Taylor ended all negotiations with Frankfurt and deemed all previous agreements unconstitutional. The reversal of Polk’s policies occurred because of the different ideology that the Taylor Administration possessed. Unfortunately for the delegates, Taylor associated with the Whig party. Unlike the Democrats, the Whig National Platform took a stance of neutrality towards the revolutions of 1848. They believed that the US should remain neutral and not get involved within European affairs. He brought in an entirely new administration that sought to undo all that Polk had done with concerns to Frankfurt and the Reichsflotte. William B. Preston replaced Mason as the Secretary of Navy and John M. Clayton became the new Secretary of State.

They wasted no time in acting and immediately stopped the armament of the war steamer. Though its production was complete and the assembly had already paid in full, Preston wanted to keep the vessel in the New York harbor. On March 19, 1849, he ordered Isaac McKeever, Commandant at the US Naval Yard in New York, and Perry to immediately stop all action concerning the armament of the ‘United States.’ McKeever and Perry both were shocked by the abrupt cancellation of the agreement. Preston explained that this order was the result of recent hostilities between the Germans and the Danes. Though Prussia had signed an armistice, it was about to expire; additionally, Frankfurt had previously protested this armistice and supported the rebels within

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78 Johnson, 13.
79 William B. Preston to Isaac McKeever, March 19, 1849. Department of State, Lexis Nexis Document, 28. Preston wrote, “The order from this department of the 23rd February ultimo […] directing you to afford the necessary facilities for the equipment […] of the steamship United States as a war steamer, is hereby revoked.” See also, William B. Preston to M. C. Perry, March 19, 1849. Ibid, 28. Preston wrote, “[…] abstain from any further participation in the preparation and equipment of the ‘United States.
Schleswig. A strong possibility existed that Frankfurt intended to use the steamer against Denmark due to the recent blockade.

The US was neutral with both nations and did not want to break with that policy. Taylor believed that US relations with Denmark would be damaged if the former supplied Frankfurt with a fully armed war steamer. His fears were not unfounded because the minister from Denmark had already made his protests known. Denmark shared Taylor’s fears that the armistice would not be renewed. They argued that Frankfurt would be likewise upset if the US provided Denmark with a war steamer. Taylor’s decision that the war steamer would cause further controversy was warranted. However, he could have been more diplomatic when cancelling the negotiations. Where Taylor really overstepped his bounds was when he began accusing the delegates of purposely trying to undermine the affairs of the US.

The delegates had enough other issues to solve concerning unification and would not waste time trying to plot the demise of a friendly nation. The delegates had plenty of enemies and could us all the support they could get. When the US offered a helping hand, the delegates logically accepted. Nevertheless, the accusations ensued. The Taylor Administration waited until the last possible moment to inform Frankfurt of the new President’s position. When Rönne came to New York to inspect the progress of the war steamer, he realized something was amiss. Initially informed through a third party about the situation, Rönne finally received a letter from Clayton on April 10, 1849. Not only did Clayton explain why the war steamer could not leave the US, he included an accusation that Frankfurt knowingly violated the Neutrality Act of Congress April 20th, 1818. Clayton said the act prohibited the sale of a war steamer to a foreign nation if it
was to be used against a friendly power.\textsuperscript{80} He further suggested that Rönne, fully aware of the existence of this act, provoked an agreement with the US concerning the purchase of a war steamer with the understanding that it would violate the neutrality between America and Denmark.

Once again, the delegates’ initial support of the rebels within Schleswig damaged their opportunity for external support. Clayton explained that the only way the war steamer could be given to Frankfurt was if the US had an assurance it would not be used against Denmark. This was a lot of information to receive and Rönne responded with surprise and obvious disgust. First he reminded Clayton of the reason why the assembly decided ask the US for assistance. On April 14, 1849, Rönne wrote, “It was but natural that Germany, being in so many respects similarly situated as the United States when they converted their confederacy of States into a federal government, should, in effecting her new organization, look to the United States for aid and advice.”\textsuperscript{81} He was adamant to clarify to Clayton that the US should be flattered by, rather than annoyed with, the assembly’s request.

Rönne also expressed his aggravation with the suggestion that the war steamer was bought for the sole purpose of attacking Denmark. Rönne exclaimed that he was unaware that the war steamer was going to be employed in contest with Denmark and sarcastically remarked, “The informers of the President must, indeed, have other or better information than the undersigned himself possesses.”\textsuperscript{82} He knew that the accusations

\textsuperscript{80} John M. Clayton to Rönne, April 10, 1849. \textit{Ibid}, 32. Clayton wrote, “[The act’s] tenth section requires the forcible detention of vessels of the character described, when about to depart under circumstances which render it probable that they are intended to commit hostilities against a friendly power.”

\textsuperscript{81} Rönne to John M. Clayton, April 14, 1849. \textit{Ibid}, 35.

\textsuperscript{82} Rönne to John M. Clayton, April 14, 1849. \textit{Ibid}, 36.
were based on assumptions and he wanted to make this point apparent to Clayton. The US had not presented any evidence to prove the delegates devised a devious plot that would undermine the US.

Rönne began to understand that the sudden change in US attitude dealt solely with the change of administration. He decided to use this realization as proof that the delegates acted legally. Rönne explained that the previous Secretary of Navy, Mason, was convinced that the war steamer would not be used for the war against Denmark. He expressed confusion in where these new suspicions about the war steamer stemmed from. Also, how could he prove to the US that the war steamer would not be used for hostile action if Frankfurt was never given the steamer? In reality, there could be no way for Rönne to give the US that assurance. The object being purchased was a war steamer that is obviously produced for war. Polk did not worry about the consequences of providing such equipment to Frankfurt. Taylor, however, would not risk the chance of entering a war with Denmark and possibly others.

Rönne also declared that he was insulted that the armament had been stopped without any previous notification. Before Clayton sent a letter long after production had ceased, the only reason he had any idea about the situation was because McKeever informed him. This action proved to be unprofessional and unfriendly. Neither Clayton nor Taylor would apologize. Instead, Clayton informed Rönne that there would be no further consideration and that the President’s decision was final. Taylor no longer

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83 Rönne to John M. Clayton, April 14, 1849. *Ibid*, 38. Rönne wrote, “It was, therefore, a matter of surprise and mortification to the undersigned that that order was revoked by the present Secretary of Navy […] without giving [me] any notice of it […]”

84 John M. Clayton to Rönne, April 29, 1849. *Ibid*, 39. Clayton wrote, “[…] the undersigned merely discharges an act of duty imposed upon him by the President, by whose directions he is precluded from
wanted to fuss with Rönne because the president would not be swayed. In Taylor’s eyes, the agreement should have never been made and Frankfurt did not even represent a German nation. The US now took the position of so many other countries; the assembly was illegitimate and insignificant to German affairs. Frederick William had the real power over the German states and could be the only one that negotiated on their behalf.

This response did not surprise Rönne, but he was certainly not going to give up without a fight. He understood that the creation of a navy would greatly benefit the delegates in their endeavor. It would bring credibility to their rule by demonstrating their ability to successfully enter into negotiations with a foreign nation and create a functioning military force for the German states. On May 1, 1849, Rönne wrote a letter explaining that if the assembly was being accused of violating the Neutrality Act of Congress of the 20th April, 1818, then the previous administration was also at fault.

Being the US President, Polk should have known about the act and yet he allowed these negotiations to ensue. Why would Frankfurt suspect the war steamer to be a violation of the act if the US encouraged the purchase? Rönne even suggested that since the transaction did not take place in secret, then there was no possible way that it could be considered illegal. The assembly would not openly conspire to violate any laws of the US.

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85 See Sondhaus article. Throughout he discusses how important the creation of a navy became to the delegates. This study agrees that the creation of a navy would have brought the delegates closer to legitimacy.

86 Rönne to John M. Clayton, May 1, 1849. Ibid, 41. Rönne wrote, “[…] the illegality of that purpose, if indeed it be illegal, was just as manifest then as it is now; and notwithstanding this, the United States government not only encouraged the consummation of the purchase, but also gave it its direct sanction […].”
Rönne’s logic did not impress Clayton and he further agitated and insulted the minister. Clayton wrote, “If the Baron’s position be sound, then the man who murders, at noon-day openly in the streets, with the concurrence of the Executive, can never be held to be a criminal.” Surprisingly, Clayton did not discuss the possibility that the previous administration should be held accountable for also violating the neutrality act. Taylor wanted to move forward and put this situation behind him. The public was already upset at his refusal to assist Frankfurt and any attack on Polk would just prolong the situation. Clayton proposed a question to Rönne asking whether or not the assembly would be angry at the US if it supplied Denmark with a fully armed war steamer. Rönne did not answer this question and ultimately came to the realization that he was fighting a losing battle. On May 15, 1849, Rönne acknowledged the President’s position and informed Clayton that the assembly would comply. The delegates had been misled by the US and wasted valuable time and effort. Polk entered into these negotiations without considering the impact the change in administration would have on the promises he made. Once again, the lack of support from surrounding nations undermined the Frankfurt Assembly’s progress towards unifying Germans into one nation.

“You have read my reply to the man-donkey-dog-pig-and-cat delegation from Frankfurt. It means in simple German: ‘Sirs! You have not any right at all to offer me anything whatsoever.’” ~ Frederick William, May 1849

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88 Rönne to John M. Clayton, May 15, 1849. Ibid, 47. Rönne wrote, “The undersigned refrains from replying to the arguments of the honorable Mr. Clayton, and from entering into any further discussion of the subject. The President having irrevocably determined as to his course respecting the steamer ‘United States,’ any such reply or discussion would be fruitless.”
The assembly found itself in the same position it was before the negotiations with the US began. They did not have a system of defense nor the credibility it needed to compete with Frederick William. The situation with Denmark significantly hindered the progress of the assembly. It convinced surrounding powers that Frankfurt should not be considered the governing authority of the German people. Duckwitz expressed extreme disappointment with the US Government. He felt that the assembly wasted time negotiating with the US when they could have found naval support elsewhere. Unfortunately for Duckwitz and the other delegates, it was just bad timing. Polk entered into negotiations with only three months left in his term. Rönne should have better understood the political situation within the US before pursuing support.

While these negotiations occurred, the revolution took a turn for the worst. Frederick William no longer wanted to just separate himself from the assembly; he wanted to shut it down completely. As stated earlier, he dissolved the Berlin Assembly in the fall of 1848. Troops had been brought in and he warned the delegates that if they continued to meet then they would be arrested. Frederick William decided to keep his promise of allowing a constitution, but now he would be the one to write it. He no longer believed that the assemblies would be necessary to keep the peace. This is something that Frederick William would make blatantly obvious to the Frankfurt Assembly.

Donelson feared that the events in Berlin would undo all the progress that the assembly had accomplished. The delegates adopted a law creating a German flag and their constitution did not contain any legislation that would provoke resistance from the

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89 Andrew J. Donelson to John M. Clayton, May 17, 1849. Ibid, 60-61. Donelson wrote, “Mr. Duckwitz [...] seemed to think that Commodore Parker should have stated his decision here, and have deferred it until his arrival at Washington, as the Central power might, in the interval, have employed British officers.”
other German states. However, the assembly was losing strength. Donelson described the chances of the king accepting the new democratic format to be as good as it was forty years ago. This fact meant that the king no longer had reason to relinquish his authority to any assembly because he now had the confidence that he could keep the peace through military and legislation.

The loss of the king’s support meant that the assembly would find difficulty in gaining legitimacy with the other German states. Many territorial rulers followed the example of Frederick William. Though some of the delegates wanted to create a government free of the old restrictions found within absolutism, the assembly needed to become more conservative in order to survive. They had tried to bring radical change to the Germans, but could not succeed without the support of other nations. However, becoming more conservative also had its dangers. The radicals within the public protested the transformation of the parliament, arguing that the delegates would become a tool for the king. The assembly now found itself in a position it had been trying to avoid.

So much debating had occurred in order to prevent any alienation and now, the delegates realized, they offended someone no matter what course of action they took. Donelson noted that popular sentiment turned against the assembly threatening to commence a revolution.

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90 Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, November 18, 1848. National Archives and Records Service. Donelson wrote, “At present, the distance between the King of Prussia and a sound constitutional representation in the opinion of many, is as great as it was forty years ago, and this distance is filled with armed soldiers and a disturbed and unhappy people.”

91 Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, November 13, 1848. Ibid. Donelson wrote, “The popular sentiment, of once directed against the local kings and the Vicaire as one and the same enemy, may decide to commence the revolution de novo, demand new elections, and throw everything again into the uncertainty of a war of barricades. In this contingency it is obvious that the Central Power would be at once dissolved, or would become the mere agent of the military force which the separate state sovereigns would place at its disposal.”
The delegates had few options and, reluctantly, began pandering to the very individuals they had condemned a year earlier. They finally agreed upon a constitution that would incorporate Prussia and make Frederick William the Emperor of the new German nation.\(^9^2\) Now, all they needed to do was convince the king to accept their offer. This last task would prove more difficult than originally thought. The delegates believed that the king would be flattered by the offer, but this was not the case. He refused the crown. Officially his reasoning was that the delegates did not have the authority to offer him such a position without the permission of all the other German states. For a long time, Frederick William had been trying to disentangle himself from Frankfurt.

Duckwitz explained that the assembly threatened the king because it claimed to be coequals. The time now existed where the king could strike because the assembly was at its most vulnerable position.\(^9^3\) Donelson noted that President Gagern seemed weakened and less confident. He no longer believed that Frankfurt could continue the fight against dynastic interests.\(^9^4\) It had lost public support and now needed the king in order to survive. However, the king no longer needed the assembly to retain his power.

Frederick William rejected the offer of the delegates. In reality, the king did not have any respect for the delegates and believed that the only purpose of the assembly was

\(^9^2\) Engels, 90. Engels wrote, “[The assembly] was forced to come to the conclusion that, ‘the sublime idea of German unity was threatened in its realization,’ which meant neither more nor less than that the Frankfurt Assembly and all it had done were very likely to end in smoke. Thus it set to work in good earnest in order to bring forth, as soon as possible, its grand production, ‘the Imperial Constitution.’”

\(^9^3\) Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, November 22, 1848. National Archives and Records Service. Duckwitz wrote, “The democratic feeling of the country, steadily increasing in this body had gone to the point at which it claimed coequal power with the king as an index of sovereignty. It was felt by the King and that if he ever could make an effectual stand against this claim the time for acting had arrived and accordingly he has made a bold movement, striking a blow which disarms open resistance, and holding over the members of the assembly the terrors of martial law.”

\(^9^4\) Donelson to Buchanan, Berlin, April 3, 1849. \textit{Ibid}. Donelson wrote, “The newspaper articles oblige me to say that the probabilities are against the success of President Gagern or another against the preservation of a popular power at Frankfurt sufficient to keep in check the opposite power represented by the Dynastic interests.”
to appease the people. He believed that his authority derived from God and that no assembly could ever bestow a title worthy of his taking. Following the refusal of the king, the assembly was dissolved without incident. This final act of humiliation spelled the end for of the Frankfurt Assembly. The delegates did not have any other support system. They could not turn to Austria due to past conflicts and recent insults. The other German states did not have the strength to back the assembly without the support of Prussia. Frederick William sent the troops to Frankfurt and the assembly was dissolved. The delegates, now labeled failures and rebels, traveled back to their homes in shame. Some immigrated to the US in order to flee the repercussions of the previous insurrection.

Engels explains that the ‘Imperial Constitution’ created, though containing contradictions, was the most liberal constitution produced in the German states; he states that “its greatest fault was that it was a mere sheet of paper, with no power to back its provisions.”95 The delegates’ effort was not purely an academic exercise but rather a dangerous endeavor that could have only succeeded if the surrounding nations became supportive of their mission. No matter how hard the delegates tried, they could not ignore the lack of support. The negotiations with the US reveal that when the delegates were recognized, they made great use of that connection. They did not just squander their time debating, but rather attempted to foster relations with a foreign nation that could help them create a navy and possibly a new German territory. It is unfortunate that the delegates did not fully understand the political structure within the US because they might have saved a lot of time and money. But, the failure of the negotiations does not

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95 Engels, 96.
erase the fact that the delegates took action to protect and preserve any legislation produced.

Ultimately, the German states were not ready for democracy and it would take many decades before authoritarianism would be erased from the German political scene. The delegates offer a glimpse into an era where German history could have taken a different path. Some historians argue that 1848 was the turning point where Germany failed to turn. This statement is only half-true, because the delegates themselves were prepared to make that turn. It was the surrounding sovereignties that could not comprehend living within a democratic society. That might be the biggest failure of the delegates; not convincing society that a liberal transformation would be worth the sacrifice.
In May 1849, only a year after the assembly first convened, Frederick William dissolved the Frankfurt Parliament. The delegates plan for a representative-unified Germany could no longer be attempted. Though Frederick William promised change and reform through a constitutional monarchy, his promise did not compare to the freedoms suggested by the delegates. About twenty-two years later, Bismarck would take control and force unification through military strength. Had the delegates been successful, Germany might have taken a different path; one towards democracy. However, one must not think that success meant democracy would be inevitable because it is impossible to predict the outcome of a successful Frankfurt Parliament.

Though one will never know what the outcome would have been if the delegates had succeeded, it is important to recognize the potential that existed during the revolutions of 1848. This time period represented a crucial point in the development of Modern Germany. Unlike the French Revolution, during 1848 the German liberals actively participated in political decisions. They realized that in order to change the old political institutions within the German states, a new government needed to provide appropriate representation to the common man. Though this type of government had been attempted in France, it was never maintained. A new democratic Germany would be revolutionary for Central Europe, which had become accustomed to absolutism.
Transitioning from an authoritarian government to one that granted political liberation could not be accomplished without conflicting ideas and debates.

Historians criticize the delegates for their lack of action. If one looks at the challenges presented to the delegates and the actions taken to resolve those challenges, then that critique becomes illogical. The problem lies in their definition of the word action. For historians who argue that the delegates failed because of a lack of action, the word action must be associated with success. If the delegates had successfully obtained legitimacy and successfully united the Germans into one nation, then those same historians would commend the delegates for their successful plan of action. This is not the cause though, as the delegates were unable to successfully unify the various states. However, is it fair to associate the assembly’s failure to a lack of action? As shown throughout this study, the delegates took many different steps to bring about unity. They actively sought foreign assistance and actively debated in the parliament.

Historians suggest that debating in parliament led to a lack of action and transformed the assembly into a philosophical forum. This study revealed that the debates were a crucial step towards the construction of a German nation with a representative government. The actors of 1848 attempted to separate themselves from the old institutions of Europe. If an absolutist state was created, then the revolution would be a farce. The reason the uprisings began was because individuals desired reform. The delegates promised to bring a change that would accurately represent the requests of the revolution. Their dedication to solving the German question through legislation reveals why debating took up so much time. The assembly wanted to make sure that all possible solutions were analyzed because a rush to unity could end in
disaster. Once a path was adopted, the assembly could collectively act to transform the German states into one nation.

Critiques of the assembly do not recognize the difficulties involved with transforming many disjointed and authoritarian driven states into one united democracy. Had the delegates not sought change and allowed for a constitutional monarchy to be immediately implemented, they would be criticized for not representing the needs and wants of the people. Yet, the delegates did take the more challenging path and are still criticized for not acting appropriately. It is as if critics then and now anticipated instant results. Due to the disjointed past of the various states, unification could not be blindly implemented. Different religious, ethnic, and economic factors needed to be reconciled before the different states could act as one. Debating became necessary for the prospect of unification. The delegates’ recognized the sensitive issues and realized that they needed to take care not to cause civil wars.

While attempting to create a constitution that would appease the various states, the delegates had to deal with the lack of support internally and externally. Though they had been officially given authority by the king, he still ruled. The delegates recognized that they needed a system of defense that would successfully uphold any legislation produced. This point was made most prevalent during the armistice of Malmö. Through the correspondences of Donelson, this study revealed the competency of the delegates to successfully negotiate on behalf of the German states. Though some historians mention these negotiations in a passing sentence, most completely ignore this event as insignificant since it did not have a successful effect on the revolutions of 1848. These negotiations give an insight into the ability of the delegates to act upon solutions created
through debating. They are extremely significant to the characterization of the assembly. The delegates sought to prepare their new nation with a system of defense. They truly believed that they had the ability to unite the German states as one.

The assembly was so much more than just an academic exercise or a philosophical forum. The delegates’ produced real solutions to real problems. Ultimately, no path would satisfy the expectations of onlookers unless it ended in success. The delegates’ sacrifice and effort have forever been overshadowed by the effect their failure had on Germany. The delegates should be commended for attempting the more challenging path. It is easy for one man with military strength to make decisions and act upon those decisions. It is more difficult for many men to make and collectively act on decisions. Creating a representative government is much more difficult due to opposing views. Many different ideas need to be reconciled through debating before legislation can be produced. Through the negotiations with the US, the delegates revealed their ability to reconcile their differences and produce results. The failure of those negotiations had nothing to do with the incompetency of the delegates but rather the political climate within the US. The biggest mistake of the delegates was their bad timing and inability to convince surrounding authorities that democracy would be worth the risk. They were much more than just a professors’ parliament. Historians feel comfortable with labeling the assembly as purely an academic exercise in German history. This assertion is because many historians only look at the results and not the efforts made. The correspondences of Donelson reveal a competency within the assembly to achieve unity if external support was obtained.
Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


