Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Modern European History Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Unit 6 –Nation-Building and War

**Option 1: Act Alone, Act Now, Force Change**

**Considering Your Option - June 9, 1904**

Parliament held a debate to decide how to handle Leopold and the situation in the Congo. Throughout the debate it was clear that MPs (Members of Parliament) were aware of the public desire for action and that the Congo Free State authorities were committing atrocities on a mass scale. Numerous MPs remarked upon how uncommon it was for all members of the House of Commons to agree upon the nature of a problem.

Opinions were not as unanimous regarding the solution. The issue involved how to create change most effectively in the Congo while also considering the diplomatic consequences for Britain’s relations with the other Great Powers.

All Members of Parliament remained very conscious of the fact that public opinion strongly favored stopping the abuses in the Congo. They also recognized that their decisions had life-or-death consequences for millions of people in the Congo and would directly affect the British economy. Furthermore, they knew they were setting a precedent for future cases involving human rights abuses and colonial administration in Africa and elsewhere.

As a member of the House of Commons, you must constantly remember that you are an elected official. Therefore you are expected to react to public opinion, but you are also expected to follow your conscience in making decisions that are for the good of the nation, both now and in the future.

Your goal is to persuade undecided MPs who are present at this debate. Your group will present a persuasive three-to-five minute summary of your option. Use this worksheet to help you prepare. After all three groups have presented their options, the MPs of the other groups will have a chance to ask you questions or challenge your ideas.

**Option 1: Act Alone, Act Now, Force Change**

Since most of the other Great Powers have succumbed to King Leopold’s powers of persuasion, Britain must act alone. Britain, with the largest empire in the world, is the strongest of the Great Powers. With four British colonies bordering on the Congo, we must not allow the situation to deteriorate and destabilize our own colonies. Our officials in the border areas already must deal with refugees who flee the Congo in a desperate search for a safe haven. Furthermore, the actions of the Congo Free State are giving colonialism a bad name; no one has more to lose from this than Britain. We cannot allow the Congo’s failures to taint Britain’s colonizing mission.

Britain led the way in developing the free trade system that has helped our country prosper. If we do not act to protect these free trade rights now, we will see the whole system start to erode. Leopold’s policies have taken their toll on British subjects as well as on the Congolese people. British merchants have been arrested and tried for practicing free trade as it is defined in the Berlin Act. Our country imports and exports more than any other nation in the world and 75 percent of our trade comes from outside of our empire. We must ensure our access to markets all over the world. British shipping lines also carry much of the world’s trade. Britain has much to lose from this state of affairs.

The British people also have a long history of being in the forefront of humanitarian movements. It was our navy that took the lead in combating the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and it was Britain that developed the Parliamentary system that now allows the force of enlightened public opinion to demand change. If other countries are unwilling to take a stand in this situation, then it is our duty to forge ahead without them.

We have seen in our own country that an economic system in which individuals are able to buy and sell their goods and services as they please has created a prosperous, happy population. We know that if the Congolese had these same rights, most of the evils now carried out by the rubber monopolies would disappear. Reform in the Congo requires more than promises of better behavior from government officials. Fundamental, far-reaching changes are needed. Land ownership must be placed back in the hands of the people. The natives must have the right to reap the fruits of their own labors. One monarch should not exercise the sort of absolute power that Leopold now maintains. This vast region must be placed under the control of some institution that is more responsive to popular concerns. While we do not suggest that the Congolese are ready to govern themselves, the Belgian Parliament could take on the powers of government and limit the power of the monarch.

The people of Britain have made it clear that they expect us to take action now. Rarely has popular opinion been so unanimous in its expectations of its elected leaders. If no other nation is willing to act, we must do so alone in order to help those who cannot help themselves. History will judge us to have acted correctly.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. According to your option, what primary British interests are at stake in the Congo debate?

2. How does the situation in the Congo relate to the manner in which Britain administers its own vast colonial empire?

3. How might Britain’s response to the situation in the Congo affect our country’s relations with the other nations of Europe?

4. How will your option affect free trade and humanitarian causes in the Congo region?

5. How has history influenced our rights, privileges, and obligation to act in the Congo?