

## **Thinking about Empire: The Administration of Ulysses S. Grant, Spanish Colonialism and the Ten Years' War in Cuba**

### **Abstract**

This article examines the attitudes of leading policymakers in the United States toward the Spanish empire in Cuba during the Ten Years' War (1868-78). It suggests that while many in the US objected to Spanish imperial practices, concerns about trade alongside ideological predispositions regarding non-intervention and race led the administration of Ulysses S. Grant, under the direction of Secretary of State Hamilton Fish, to develop a series of policies that in effect supported colonialism in Cuba while attempting to ensure that the US would benefit from any change in rule there. The article argues that despite an apparent desire for the US to remain neutral during the conflict, the Grant administration in fact formulated its responses based on a narrow conception of Spanish colonial control that demonstrated an increasing sense of moral superiority over both colonizer and colonized.

## Thinking about Empire: The Administration of Ulysses S. Grant, Spanish Colonialism and the Ten Years' War in Cuba

Writing in the *North American Review* in March 1898 on the eve of war with Spain, the historian John Holladay Latané observed that, since the American Civil War, American policy toward Spain and Cuba had been “largely concerned in urging upon Spain the abolition of slavery in Cuba, the establishment of a more liberal form of government through independence or autonomy, and the promotion of a more untrammelled [sic] commercial intercourse with the United States.”<sup>1</sup> In making this observation, Latané neatly encapsulated not only the contours of US policy immediately before the outbreak of conflict between the United States and the Spanish empire, but some of its elements over the previous generation. Before the Spanish-American War, the United States had attempted to attenuate Spanish imperial rule through modest and sporadic waves of diplomatic pressure.

This course of action had been established by the administration of Ulysses S. Grant (1869-1877) during the so-called Ten Years' War in Cuba. This conflict between groups of insurgents and forces of the colonial Spanish regime that began in 1868 was broadly coterminous with the eight years of the Grant administration and therefore occupied a great deal of its attention. *Inter alia*, Cuba's location, its close trade association with the US and longstanding American interests in acquiring (or at least economically controlling) the island, as well as the brutal nature of the war itself, were all important factors in generating this intense scrutiny that strained relations with Spain on numerous occasions and even threatened war following the seizure of the US ship the *Virginius* in 1873. Throughout the conflict, the US government was placed under considerable pressure from Congress and sections of the American

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Latané, “Intervention of the United States in Cuba,” *North American Review*, 166, 496 (March 1898), 351.

press and people to take some action, ranging from recognizing that a state of war existed on the island through to military intervention.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the Grant administration largely resisted pressure to support the insurgency, and its criticism of Spanish rule was consistently muted as important figures in Washington, and especially the Secretary of State, Hamilton Fish, sought to modify rather than end Spanish colonial practices. Their primary objective was to alter what they saw as the autocratic and at times barbaric nature of Spanish control, especially the continuation of slavery (a particular point of contention among members of the Republican Party after 1865), and to challenge the exclusion of the United States from open trade with Cuba. Yet it did very little to pursue an overtly anti-colonial agenda and at times even supported the continuation of Spanish sovereignty over the Cuban population as part of a drive to enhance its own material interests in Cuba, avoid antagonizing Madrid and conform to the tenets of the increasingly influential Monroe Doctrine.<sup>3</sup> While this was partially because of the relatively weak position of the United States after its own civil war and during the domestic trauma of Reconstruction, these attitudes indicate a complex and often contradictory set of ideas about Spanish imperialism in the Caribbean during this period that were important influences on developing conceptions among leading

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<sup>2</sup> On the United States and the Ten Years' War, see especially Jay Sexton, "The United States, the Cuban Rebellion, and the Multilateral Initiative of 1875," *Diplomatic History*, 30 (2006), 335-65; Lester D. Langley, *The Cuban Policy of the United States: A Brief History* (New York: Wiley, 1968), 53-81; James B Chapin, "Hamilton Fish and the Lessons of the Ten Year's War," in Jules David, ed., *Perspectives on American Diplomacy* (New York: Arno, 1976), 131-63 .

<sup>3</sup> See Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2011)

Republicans of the United States' regional and global identity, and, ultimately, its emergence as an imperial power.<sup>4</sup>

While there has been an enormous amount of scholarship on the notion of the United States as an empire, both formally in places such as Cuba itself and the Philippines after 1898 and informally around the world during and after the Cold War, relatively little has been written about American views of European empires in the late nineteenth century and especially during Reconstruction.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, some of the most influential American commentaries on European forms of imperialism have been in popular rather than academic writings, such as those by Mark Twain and Jack London.<sup>6</sup> This lack of sustained attention to high-level political thought about empires is curious when the US operated largely within an Atlantic system dominated by European nations, and the main challenge to its influence in the Americas came not from other American countries but from European colonial and former colonial powers.

In part, this omission can be attributed to what Ann Laura Stoler has identified as the awkwardness of aligning notions of an American empire with those of European colonialism. As she suggests, at first glance the idea of an American metropole controlling subjugated colonies seems anomalous in the context of US history, except perhaps for the Philippines in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, as Stoler also notes, the “uncertainties” of terms associated with empires should not be viewed as what

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<sup>4</sup> See Frank Ninkovich, *Global Dawn: The Cultural Foundation of American Internationalism, 1865-1890* (Cambridge, MA and London, England, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Frank Ninkovich, *The United States and Imperialism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 262.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Twain, *Following the Equator and Anti-Imperialist Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Jack London, *Tales of the Pacific* (London: Penguin, 1989).

she calls “conceptual liabilities” but rather seen as “entry points for further analysis.”<sup>7</sup> In this spirit (although he does not cite Stoler’s work), David Hendrickson has sought to provide a taxonomy of American international thought from the earliest stages of the union that utilizes the contending concepts of “American internationalism,” “nationalism” and “imperialism” to understand how Americans saw their developing role in the world. Specifically, Hendrickson suggests that imperialism is a relatively new concept because most Americans have traditionally thought in nationalistic terms. Although he concedes that both economic and cultural nationalism, when carried to extremes, can spill over into forms of imperialism, Hendrickson propounds a view of nineteenth century political thought that privileged non-intervention and self-determination over intervention and interference, and therefore nationalism over imperialism.<sup>8</sup> While undoubtedly helpful in understanding competing strands of international thought, Hendrickson’s conception of empire can be criticized for being too narrow and static, as well as lacking in historical specificity. In the immediate post-Civil War period, for example, the brief moment of optimism about the possibilities of emancipation at home encouraged African-American political activists such as Frederick Douglass to support pan American ideals as a way to advance the lives of African-Americans in the United States and elsewhere in the Americas. Despite rejecting arguments in favor of the forcible acquisition of territory, and opposition to such schemes as the purchase of a naval base at Môle St. Nicholas in Haiti, Douglass utilized idea of black pan Americanism to support President Grant’s ultimately unsuccessful policy of annexing the Dominican

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<sup>7</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, “Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and the Unseen,” in Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>8</sup> David C. Hendrickson, *Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate Over International Relations, 1789-1941* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 13-22.

Republic.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, as postcolonialists such as Stoler and Amy Kaplan have argued, broadening understandings of what constitutes an empire and its related forms, including through literary studies and anthropology as well as historical case-studies, can help dilute notions of American exceptionalism by drawing out connections between American and European imperial experiences, and domestic and foreign politics, without, in Frederick Cooper's words, using the notion of empire "as an epithet for any form of power."<sup>10</sup>

This article contends that conceptions of colonialism at the institutional level, as well as the threats this colonialism posed to US trade and commerce, were crucial themes in the development of expansionist thought in the United States in the years that followed the Civil War. While Americans in positions of influence often objected to the idea and some of the practices of colonialism, they usually did so not because of an overriding anti-imperial ideology, but because of the constraints that formal European colonial control placed on American economic expansion and the spread of republican ideals, especially in the Americas. Many had a grudging admiration for the way the European powers, and the British in particular, were amassing economic power after 1850, especially through the informal imperialism practiced throughout much of the Americas in which these powers sought to gain the economic benefits of imperial dominance without the constraints of formal colonial control, even if they were dissatisfied with the resulting limits that it placed on U.S. economic expansionism. Moreover, their objections to the imposition of more formal patterns of imperial rule often led them to overlook both the aspirations of the colonized *and* the colonizers' attempts to reform. This article argues that in reducing the

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<sup>9</sup> Millery Polyné, *From Douglass to Duvalier: U.S. African Americans, Haiti, and Pan Americanism, 1870-1964* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010), esp. 25-44.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 12.

complexities of imperialism to supposed transgressions of what Washington accepted as “civilized” norms in international affairs, these Americans were increasingly “thinking like an empire” as they considered their own place in the international system.<sup>11</sup>

During the nineteenth century Cuba held enormous symbolic power in the United States, perhaps more than its political or diplomatic status warranted, and by the middle of the century Cuba’s economic and industrial development only served to reinforce this and to undermine the case for continued Spanish rule. The geographic proximity of Cuba to the United States gave the US access and as early as the 1820s, Louis Perez suggests that 50 per cent of Cuba’s trade was dependent on access to North American markets.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, before the American Civil War many people in the United States had looked to Cuba to bring it and other American territories into the Union, most notably as a way to expand the institution of slavery and the power of the slaveholding south. Such ideas went back at least as far as Thomas Jefferson and culminated in the 1854 Ostend Manifesto that sought to annex Cuba, tainting US-Cuban relations and raising the ire of many northerners in the United States. Yet, as John Patrick Leary has recently shown, US views of Cuba were extremely complex and often contradictory, and, during the 1840s and 1850s, northerners as well as southerners often supported annexation even if they disagreed on the reasons for, and the means of, achieving it.<sup>13</sup> Emancipation in the United States

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>12</sup> See Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 25-6; Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 35.

<sup>13</sup> John Patrick Leary, “Cuba in the American Imaginary: Literature and National Culture in Cuba and the United States, 1848-1958,” Unpublished PhD dissertation, New York University, 2009; Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream*

changed the nature of these discussions, but debates about annexation continued following the Civil War.

Although the US still held no territorial possessions in the Caribbean in the years after 1865, its growing economic power increasingly saw it vying for commercial and trading influence with the European colonial powers in such places as Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. From the 1870s, burgeoning global demand for sugar, especially in Western Europe and North America, and the high capital costs of investing in the industry gave first Cubans and then capitalists from the United States increasing access in Santo Domingo. Yet US domination of sugar markets there was not complete before the 1890s.<sup>14</sup> Similarly in Haiti, investors and traders from the United States dominated only staple goods, while Europeans – and especially those from Great Britain – did so in other areas.<sup>15</sup> Yet the influence of the US was rising, a fact aptly illustrated by events in Cuba immediately following the end of the American Civil War when a new repressive ministry in Spain imposed a new set of protectionist policies to which the United States responded by placing tariffs on numerous Cuban goods. These moves coincided with a drop in sugar production and prices that brought disaster to the Cuban economy and further exposed

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*of a Caribbean Empire, 1854-1861* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1973); Robert E. May, *Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London, University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Martin F. Murphy, *Dominican Sugar Plantations: Production and Foreign Labor Integration* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 11-13.

<sup>15</sup> Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Haiti and the United States: The Psychological Moment* (Athens, GA, and London: University of Georgia Press, 1992), esp. 57-60.



the problems of Spanish rule, setting off calls for revolution that resulted in the start of ten years of fighting.<sup>16</sup>

US suspicion of Spanish imperialism at this time was not simply based on economic imperatives, however. The desire among settlers in the United States for land that was occupied by Spain had inevitably brought mutual suspicion and mistrust that was, in James Cortada's words, "virtually institutionalized" by both governments in the first years of the US republic, and this continued for decades afterwards.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as María DeGuzmán has recently argued, the development of a distinct national identity in the United States was based in part on "repulsion" and "romancing" of Spanish figures in cultural contexts. DeGuzmán notes that this phenomenon developed as the nineteenth century progressed despite Spain's weakening position in the Americas and it contributed to a perception that, even after independence from Spain, Latin America was distinctly Spanish. DeGuzmán therefore concludes that Spain acted as something of a "bridge" between "colonizer and colonized" rather than simply being seen as a white, Catholic colonizer.<sup>18</sup>

During the period of Reconstruction, Secretary of State Hamilton Fish in many ways embodied this complex and apparently contradictory set of attitudes toward European imperialism in general and Spanish imperialism in particular. Fish served for all of Grant's term of office and thus dominated the policymaking process during almost all of the Ten Years' War. A former Whig, Fish was a rather colorless

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<sup>16</sup> Perez, *Cuba and the United States*, 49-50.

<sup>17</sup> James W. Cortada, *Two Nations Over Time: Spain and the United States, 1776-1977* (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood, 1978), 17.

<sup>18</sup> María DeGuzmán, *Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire* (Minneapolis, MN, and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). See also Leary, "Cuba in the American Imaginary," 1-60.

figure and because of this he has been marginalized in the historiography of United States foreign relations in spite of his length of service and relative importance.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he dominated American diplomacy during a decade of hesitancy in the 1870s, succeeding his much better known friend William H. Seward, who had cut something of a lonely figure in calling for a rapidly expanding US commercial empire in the age of the Civil War, but preceding those who advocated building-up US naval power, developing island coaling stations and negotiating new customs treaties as a means to attain greater regional influence, and who began to flourish in the 1880s. Fish therefore essentially plotted a middle course between isolationism and interventionism, unilateralism and multilateralism, suspicion of the imperial powers and recognition that their geopolitical power necessitated involvement in the hemisphere. Furthermore, he exemplified the tension in American diplomacy between a desire for global influence alongside clear limits on territorial acquisitions, and, very much like Seward, he saw advantages in a European-style informal empire for the United States. Fish was therefore a product of his times; determined to enhance the American position in the Caribbean, but aware of the limits of US influence at the specific moment in which he held office. He knew that the United States was unprepared to fully embrace Seward's calls for an expanded commercial empire, as he had seen in his

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of Fish's tenure, see Joseph V. Fuller, "Hamilton Fish," in Samuel Flagg Bemis (ed.), *The American Secretaries of States and Their Diplomacy*, 4 (New York: Cooper Square, 1963), 123-214. For generally positive perspectives, see, for example, Allan Nevins, *Hamilton Fish: The Inner History of the Grant Administration* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1936); Justin Libby, "Hamilton Fish and the Origins of Anglo-American Solidarity," *Mid-America*, 76 (1994), 205-226; Clifford W. Haury, "Hamilton Fish and the Conservative Tradition" in Norman A. Graebner, *Traditions and Values: American Diplomacy, 1865-1945* (Lanham, MD, and London: University Press of America, 1985), 1-27. A more negative portrayal can be found in James B. Chapin, "Hamilton Fish and American Expansion," in Frank J. Merli and Theodore A. Wilson, eds., *Makers of American Diplomacy: From Benjamin Franklin to Alfred Thayer Mahan* (New York: Scribner, 1974), 223-51.

predecessor's unsuccessful attempts to acquire the Danish West Indies and the naval station at Môle St. Nicolas in the late 1860s, and as he experienced himself when he failed to persuade a reluctant Congress to endorse President Grant's scheme to acquire the Dominican Republic in 1870.

Like many of his contemporaries, Fish's particular ambivalence toward Cuba at this time resulted from his concern about the potential social, political and economic consequences for the United States of the debilitating Cuban war. In principle it seems that he supported eventual Cuban independence, noting at the beginning of his tenure the "sympathy which Americans feel for all people striving to secure for themselves more liberal institutions and that inestimable right of self government which we prize as the foundation of all progress and achievement."<sup>20</sup> Yet Fish had visited the island in 1855 and, while he liked much of what he saw there, was repelled by the population because of its racial make-up.<sup>21</sup> He believed the black Cuban to be inferior to the black American and therefore rejected the idea that Cuba could be brought into the union – an important consideration in his mind when he became secretary of state as the fourteenth amendment had just been adopted – and instead preferred the idea that an independent Cuba would be a "guardianship or trusteeship" of the United States, a patronizing and infantilizing view that seemed to reflect a broader American desire to play the role of "political mentor" that Janice Jayes has identified in relation to Mexico.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Fish to Sickles, 29 June 1869, Records of the Department of State, Record Group (RG) 59, Diplomatic Instructions, Spain, 16: roll 144, 2, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD. Hereafter cited as NARA.

<sup>21</sup> Eric T. Love, *Race Over Empire: Racism and U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 39.

<sup>22</sup> Fish to Alexander Hamilton Jr., 13 March 1870, quoted in Chapin, "Hamilton Fish and American Expansion," 245; Janice Lee Jayes, *The Illusion of Ignorance: Constructing the American Encounter with Mexico, 1877-1920* (Lanham, MA: University Press of America, 2011), 222.

Fish's notion of guardianship spoke to broader Republican concerns about the racial problems of expansion into the Caribbean. Race also played an important part in generating negative reactions to the Santo Domingo purchase, which key Republicans such as Justin S. Morrill, Carl Schurtz, and Charles Sumner opposed in part because of the potential difficulties that they envisioned with integrating people of color from the Caribbean into the US system of government. Sumner, Chairman of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee and therefore the most prominent of these men, based his highly influential arguments on the notion that, despite being equal, different races were destined to inhabit different geographical areas and, in rejecting annexation of Santo Domingo, he instead suggested some form of protectorate as an alternative.<sup>23</sup> For Fish, moving toward such a position of guardianship over Cuba would take time, however. The first occasion Grant's cabinet met to consider the Cuba problem, Fish observed that it was "too soon to decide the question; that the madness and fatuity of the Spanish Dominion in Cuba seemed to be producing a condition of affairs and state of feeling that would compel all the civilized nations to regard the Spanish rule as an international nuisance, which must be abated, when they would all be glad that we should interpose and regulate control of the island."<sup>24</sup>

Fish's views were based on racial stereotypes suggesting that the Cuban forces were unable to organize themselves politically; reinforcing a belief that Spanish rule remained the least bad option for the present time. In following this line, the United States government during the 1870s largely accepted

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Nicholas Guyatt, "America's Conservatory: Race, Reconstruction, and the Santo Domingo Debate," *Journal of American History*, 97 (2011), 974-1000; Dennis Hidalgo, "Charles Sumner and the Annexation of the Dominican Republic," *Itinerario*, 21 (1997)

<sup>24</sup> Diary of Hamilton Fish. Hereafter cited as Fish Diary. 6 April 1869, Papers of Hamilton Fish, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as Fish Papers, LOC).

Spanish contentions that because of Cuba's racial make-up and history, in Ada Ferrer's words, it "could not be a nation."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps based on his skepticism about the abilities of the Cuban population, Fish was unconvinced about the insurgency's chances of success. Early in the war, Fish disagreed with the president who thought the Spanish would have trouble regaining control of the island, claiming it was the insurgents who would fail because they were "inefficient, & have done little for themselves".<sup>26</sup>

The influence of this racial prejudice can even be seen in the infamous *Virginius* affair of 1873, which brought the United States and Spain close to war and has received considerable scholarly attention, but which in fact failed to produce any meaningful change in the attitude toward Spanish imperialism in Washington. The capture of the ship flying the US flag by Spain and the execution of a large number of its crew, including 53 Americans, caused uproar in the US, as many called for the nation to declare war on Spain, and led to Madrid having to pay indemnity charges to cover all the claims.<sup>27</sup> But while the Grant administration seemed to be moving toward a position where it might actually recognize the insurgents, the incident in fact had little impact on the broader parameters of Grant and Fish's Cuban policy.

In addition to racial prejudice, Richard Bradford suggests that a number of different factors, including the lack of public and political desire for war, an uninfluential press, and the relatively poor state of US forces following the end of the Civil War all helped to prevent a declaration of war on Spain. Yet it was the race issue that was of particular importance, he argues, because of the dim view Fish and his colleagues took of the black population in Cuba and the deep divisions in the United States following the

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<sup>25</sup> Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Fish Dairy, 13 Dec. 1869, Fish Papers, LOC.

<sup>27</sup> Fish Diary, 8 Nov. 1873, Fish Papers, LOC.

conclusion of the Civil War. The *Virginus* affair led to the removal from office of Daniel E. Sickles, the ambassador to Madrid, primarily because of his attempt to steer the United States toward war with Spain. Yet it was also significant that his replacement, the moderate Caleb Cushing, reinforced Fish's racial views. Cushing complained to Fish, for example, that the rebels could "produce no man of commanding military talent" because "otherwise they would find something better to do than merely to burn and murder, and would be commanded by Cubans, not by Dominicans and Mexicans."<sup>28</sup> On another occasion, he claimed that there was a greater threat to the Creoles than to Spain in Cuba because the insurgency sought to eliminate the white race there. He drew parallels with the Haitian revolution at the beginning of the century, and suggested that the current state of affairs promised "to carry Cuba for generations to come into the same series of military usurpations, sanguinary civil wars, [and] sterile revolutions, with their accompanying barbarism, which have characterized independent Hayti."<sup>29</sup> Bradford also notes the importance of relations with Spain, in particular because at the time of the incident Spain was a republic and the US government saw this as a potentially much more liberal regime that chimed with American values and held out the possibility of reform in the colonies.<sup>30</sup> More than this, influential public figures such as Sumner, Schurz and Oliver P. Morton continued to urge caution and emphasized their respect for Spain.<sup>31</sup> It therefore did not change US attitudes toward either the Spanish colonial regime or those who were fighting against it. Furthermore, in coming to such conclusions about the supposed inability of Caribbean peoples to look after themselves, Fish, Cushing

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<sup>28</sup> Cushing to Fish, 24 May 1876, RG 59, M31, roll 77, NARA.

<sup>29</sup> Cushing to Fish, 3 June 1876, RG 59, M31, roll 78, NARA.

<sup>30</sup> See Sickles to Fish, 11 July 1872, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington, DC: US Govt. Printing Office, 1871-75). Hereafter cited as *FRUS*. 1872, 561; Fish to Sickles, 29 Oct. 1872, *FRUS*, 1872, 580-4.

<sup>31</sup> Richard H. Bradford, *The Virginus Affair* (Boulder, CO: Colorado Associated University Press, 1980), 131-33.

and others were, ironically, re-inscribing arguments made by slaveholders from the south. From her new home in Cuba on the eve of the Ten Years' War, for example, former Louisiana slaveholder Eliza McHatton wrote to her sister: "The more we see of the Cuban character, the more convinced we are that a military government is what they need. They are totally unfit for freedom & the pusillanimous puppies will never have it unless some strong nation fights for it, for them."<sup>32</sup> The language that Fish and Cushing employed may have been subtler, but the sentiment was strikingly similar.

Despite Fish's cynicism about the prospects for Cuba, however, many Americans were more positive, placing the secretary of state and President Grant under considerable domestic pressure to recognize the belligerency. President Grant was, in fact, sympathetic to the Cuban cause and he expressed a belief that the Cubans would succeed.<sup>33</sup> Early in the war, other influential Americans also took the side of those struggling to escape from Spanish colonialism, perhaps most prominently Secretary of War, John A. Rawlins (who had close links with the rebels) and Daniel Sickles, both of whom believed that the Cubans deserved their independence and wanted Grant and Fish to aid the insurgency. A lower ranked official went further: as Grant was taking office, Henry R. de La Reintre, the US Vice Consul in Havana resigned his position in protest at Spanish actions against American citizens, and urged Grant to recognize Cuban autonomy.<sup>34</sup> Simultaneously, in the first of many congressional interventions, the

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 101.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Fish to Roberts, 13 Oct. 1869, Fish Papers, Diplomatic Drafts, box 224, LOC; "Gen. Grant Said to be in Favor of Cuban Independence," *New York Times*, 18 Jan. 1869.

<sup>34</sup> Henry R. de La Reintre to Grant, 26 Feb. 1869, and 13 March 1869, in John Y. Simon, ed., *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 31 Vols. (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-2009). Hereafter cited as *Grant Papers*. 19, 351-2.

House of Representatives passed a bipartisan resolution, stating that the people of the United States were in sympathy with those of Cuba “in their effort to secure their independence,” and would “welcome to the family of independent nations a republican government that guarantees the liberty of all persons.” It authorized the president to recognize the independence of Cuba “whenever in his opinion a republican form of government shall have been in fact established.”<sup>35</sup>

Grant also received correspondence from many US citizens in support of the rebellion, and various groups around the nation passed resolutions in favor of the Cuban cause.<sup>36</sup> Influential minister and President of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, Edward Greenleaf Eliot’s views on the affair were typical. In a missive to Grant in early 1873, Eliot acknowledged the difficulties of interfering in another nation’s affairs, but argued that Cuba was a unique case, not just because the island was close to the United States but because its predicament touched on such fundamental issues: “it is a struggle of freedom against tyranny, and we, as a free nation, ought not to stand coldly looking...for there are great principles of humanity which, in the long trial, become the grandest statesmanship: and if we, as a nation, permit that old oppressor, Spain, to tread down the hopes of freedom in that beautiful land, History will sorely punish us for our neglect.”<sup>37</sup>

Yet Fish resisted these kinds of pressures fairly easily by using recent precedents. Although a number of issues dominated his refusal to recognize the rebels, early British and French recognition of the

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<sup>35</sup> Appendix to the *Congressional Globe*, 41<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 18-21.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, “Cuban Independence, Immense Mass Meeting at Steinway Hall,” *New York Times*, 26 March 1869; “Cuba Independence, Large Meeting at Cooper Institute Last Evening,” *New York Times*, 5 May 1869; “The South Carolina Legislature – Cuban Recognition,” *New York Times*, 30 Nov. 1869; “Cuba. Action Asked by Congress,” *New York Times*, 3 Dec. 1869.

<sup>37</sup> William G. Eliot to Grant, 2 Jan. 1873 in *Grant Papers*, 23, 301-2.



Confederacy during the American Civil War through their declaration of neutrality was the most important.<sup>38</sup> As Washington's objections to these actions were a part of the ongoing *Alabama* claims, Fish knew that it was very difficult for the US to contemplate acknowledging the belligerency of the Cuban rebels without being seen as hypocritical.<sup>39</sup> Commenting on the House resolution, the *New York Times* concurred: "Any plea now presented for acknowledging the Cuban insurrection, or for hastily recognizing any body purporting to be a Government which the insurrection may produce, may be urged with greater force by Great Britain and France in justification of their conduct toward the Confederacy." It suggested that if the House was right to argue for belligerent rights during the present struggle in Cuba which was "trifling", then the European powers were correct to grant the privileges of belligerency in 1861 to "a rebellion which by comparison was gigantic."<sup>40</sup>

In private at least, many Republicans hoped that the rebellion signaled the end of Spanish imperialism in the hemisphere, yet they also worried about antagonizing Spain because, as the unrest lingered and periodically worsened, they harbored deep fears that it would be exacerbated by the intervention of other European powers, perhaps even in concert with one another. Charles Sumner said that he wished "the Cuba question looked clearer, & nearer a solution. Spain must go, & the sooner she sees it the better for all."<sup>41</sup> Yet he thought that recognizing the insurgency "would be a wrong to Spain; therefore I cannot consent to it." Sumner detested the idea that the US might go to war, although it was also clear that the philanthropic outlook he adopted here was tempered by his admission that such a war would

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<sup>38</sup> Fish to Roberts, 17 April 1869, Fish Papers, Diplomatic Drafts, box 224, LOC.

<sup>39</sup> See Fish to Lopez Robert, 28 Dec. 1870, *FRUS*, 1871, 785-91.

<sup>40</sup> "The Demand for Cuban Recognition," *New York Times*, 16 April 1869.

<sup>41</sup> Sumner to Julia Kean Fish, 29 Sept. 1869 in Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., *Selected Letters of Charles Sumner*, 2 Vols. (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 2, 491.

divert attention from his real goal of gaining (newly independent) Canada.<sup>42</sup> He was sympathetic to the Cuban rebels but repelled by the idea that the US might actually try to control Cuba as a colony. Instead, he believed that it was the duty of the United States government to convince liberals within Spain that “the day of European colonies has passed – at least in this hemisphere” and that, like other Caribbean islands such as Santo Domingo, Cuba would move into the American orbit and become a US protectorate.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, future president James A. Garfield argued in the House of Representatives that it was not the moment to “increase our complications with foreign nations.” He continued: “I hope our government will be very slow in taking any measures in relation to Cuba, in relation to Spain, in relation to Great Britain and in relation to any other nation with whom we are now at peace to deepen the angry feelings which already exist.”<sup>44</sup>

In response to these pressures, Fish could present the government’s position as one that tilted toward ideological support for anti-imperial causes while resisting calls to interfere in the affairs of European nations in the Americas, as set out in the Monroe Doctrine. Prefacing comments on Cuba in his first annual message to Congress, for example, President Grant (in a passage written by Fish) explained that because the United States was “the freest of all nations” its people sympathized with those who struggled for “liberty and self-government”. Yet he noted that “we should abstain from enforcing our views upon unwilling nations and from taking an interested part, *without invitation*, in the quarrels

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<sup>42</sup> Sumner to Howe, 16 March 1870 in Edward L. Pierce, ed., *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, 4 Vols. (Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers, 1877-93), 4, 426.

<sup>43</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Rights of Man* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 416-17.

<sup>44</sup> Theodore Clarke Smith, *The Life and Letters of James Abram Garfield*, 2 Vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1925), 1, 487.

between different nations or between governments and their subjects [emphasis added].”<sup>45</sup> So the president authorized Sickles to offer the good offices of the United States to the Cabinet in Madrid on the following terms: that the independence of Cuba would be acknowledged by Spain; that Cuba would pay compensation to Spain in recognition of her interests in the island, although this might be paid in installments; the abolition of slavery in Cuba; and an armistice pending the agreement of terms.<sup>46</sup>

Beyond such practical considerations, Fish’s perceptions of the nature of Spanish rule reinforced a sense of superiority on the part of the United States government over both colonizer and colonized. In his reports back to his superior, Sickles did much to emphasize the vicious tactics that the Spanish troops were willing to employ and augmented these with cuttings from Spanish newspapers, some of which began speculating that Spain would lose the war, or at least that it would be years before the rebellion was brought under control.<sup>47</sup> In fact, pressure from groups within Spain to attenuate their rule in Cuba was widespread, and successive governments in Madrid made attempts to reform throughout the conflict. Some in the Spanish military offered concessions to those who surrendered, for example, General Arsenio Martínez Campos’ whose activities in central Cuba from 1876 combined renewed military vigor with promises of pardons or even money if rebels turned themselves in.<sup>48</sup>

This is not to suggest that Spanish conduct in the war was commendable, far from it; rather that Fish and some of those around him generally did not (perhaps could not) recognize the changes that were

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<sup>45</sup> First Annual Message, 6 Dec. 1869 in James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897*, 10 Vols. (Washington, DC: US Govt. Printing Office, 1898), 7, 31-32.

<sup>46</sup> Fish to Sickles, 29 June 1869, RG 59, Diplomatic Instructions, Spain, 16, roll 144, 2, NARA.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Sickles to Fish, 12 July 1870, RG 59, M31, roll 49, NARA.

<sup>48</sup> See Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 101-2; Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba*, 60-7.

taking place. In 1872, for example, Fish wrote to Sickles to complain that while Spanish diplomats had often acknowledged the oppression to which Washington objected over the previous few years, Madrid had done nothing of any significance to deal with it: “Again and again did you remonstrate against this thing as offensive to American civilization and dangerous to it...” Fish commented. “All of your remonstrances have been met with silence; no reply having been made to your complaints on the subject of this grievance.”<sup>49</sup> Even after the accession of more liberal regimes in Madrid and, from February 1873, a republican government, Washington apparently saw little moderation in Spain’s brutal oppression.<sup>50</sup>

The Grant administration also urged the Spanish to move toward what Fish called “efficient and practical” abolition of slavery.<sup>51</sup> This was certainly a delicate enterprise. While before the Civil War many Americans had often looked to expand slavery US slavery by incorporating Cuba, now the main impetus for a closer association with Cuba came from radical Republicans such as Nathaniel P. Banks, Orville Babcock and Benjamin Butler, who saw abolition as an achievable outcome of the Cuban struggle and, in Butler’s case, even suggested going to war with Spain to achieve it.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, emancipation in the United States encouraged Cuban reformers to seek a closer association with the US, and perhaps even annexation, in order to rid the island of slavery.<sup>53</sup> This gave Fish cause to worry that any statement the president made could be seized upon by those in the US who supported recognition of the belligerency,

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<sup>49</sup> See Fish to Sickles, 19 April 1872 in *Grant Papers*, 23, 73.

<sup>50</sup> See esp. Fish to Sickles, 23 April 1873, Fish Papers, Instructions, Spain, box 238, LOC; Fish to Sickles, 24 April 1873, *Ibid*; Fish to Sickles, 27 Aug. 1873, *FRUS*, 1873, 1032-3.

<sup>51</sup> Fish to Sickles, 31 Aug. 1872, Fish Papers, Diplomatic Drafts, box 229, LOC.

<sup>52</sup> See Sexton, “Multilateral Initiative of 1875,” 351-353.

<sup>53</sup> Cushing to Fish, 23 Nov. 1874, RG 59, M31, roll 64, NARA.

and thus allow the US to “drift” into a war that he thought was “unwilling of the dignity of a Great Government...”<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps because he did not know about them, Fish largely failed to acknowledge the tentative steps that Spain was taking toward abolition, as well as the effects these changes were having on the ground. As Rebecca Scott has shown, very gradual emancipation began during the Ten Years’ War, and the process was highly complex and challenging. From early in the war, the insurgency in some parts of the country (especially in the east) encouraged what Scott labels “nominal” abolition that saw some slaves freeing themselves and fighting for independence. These developments placed pressure on the metropolitan center and, in response, the Spanish Cortes introduced the so-called Moret Law of 1870 that gave freedom to very young and old slaves, but also held out the promise of emancipation to others, thus changing the parameters of the debate about slavery and offering the possibility of ending it.<sup>55</sup> Such moves were certainly limited because, as Christopher Schmidt-Nowara argues, planters resisted such reforms and so slavery largely continued as before, but these attempts were largely lost on Washington. Caleb Cushing lamented that he do could little regarding reform in Cuba because no Spanish leader was politically strong enough to make sufficient concessions.<sup>56</sup> “Thus far all the efforts of Spain have proved abortive,” stated Grant in the section of his 1875 address that Fish had written, “and time has marked no improvement in the situation.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Fish Diary, 5 Nov. 1875, Fish Papers, LOC.

<sup>55</sup> Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). See also, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Slavery, Freedom, and Abolition in Latin America and the Atlantic World* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), esp. 147-50.

<sup>56</sup> Cushing to Fish, 4 Nov. 1874; Cushing to Fish, 23 Nov. 1874, RG 59, M31, roll 64, NARA.

<sup>57</sup> Seventh Annual Message, 7 Dec. 1875 in Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 7, 336-8.

Paradoxically, despite this generally negative view of Spain, Fish bolstered his case for refusing to aid the rebels in Cuba because, just like the Spanish, they were participating in acts of extreme violence that apparently undermined their case for independence. In part, Fish objected to these practices because they threatened US economic interests on the island and the well being of many Americans who lived there, another point of contention between Washington and Madrid during the conflict. But in taking this stance, he outlined a set of norms and standards to which, he and the president claimed, “civilized” nations were supposed to conform and which both the Spanish imperialists *and* aspiring Cuban republicans had failed to do. This was, of course, particularly problematic following the bloody American Civil War, which could hardly be characterized as “civilized” on either side, but with slavery now abolished in the United States, Washington believed it could occupy a superior moral position.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the measures being taken by the insurgents against Spain suited Fish because they relieved pressure on him to favor one side over another.<sup>59</sup>

It seems that Fish went as far as he could to dampen support for the Cuban insurgents. In January 1870, he planted a story in the *New York Herald* claiming that the rebellion was effectively over, although he knew that this was definitely not the case, to try to reduce the clamor for recognition.<sup>60</sup> And when, in 1872, a ship, the *Pioneer*, had arrived in Rhode Island claiming to be from the Cuban Republic, and the captain of the vessel said he was from the Cuban Navy and requested official recognition from the Secretary of State because the Cuban insurgency had been recognized by a number of American nations,

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Cushing to Fish, 2 Jan. 1876, RG 59, M31, roll 75, NARA.

<sup>59</sup> See Fish to Sickles, 26 Jan. 1870, RG 59, Diplomatic Instructions, Spain, 16: roll 144, 26, NARA.

<sup>60</sup> Philip S. Foner, *A History of Cuba and its Relations with the United States*, 2 Vols. (New York: International Publisher's, 1962), 2, 214-15.

Fish demurred.<sup>61</sup> He claimed that he could not officially receive him, even as a private citizen, a line he held despite the captain's appeal to the precedent of the American Revolution when France recognized the independence of the United States while other countries did not. Grant, under the influence of Fish, was also clear that Spain was "a nation with whom the United States are at peace" and so gave the Marshall of the District of Rhode Island permission to take possession of the vessel. In response, the captain complained of a conspiracy between the United States and Spain.<sup>62</sup> This episode was something of a forerunner of the much better known incident concerning the *Virginus* that took place the following year, showing Fish's deeply entrenched views and his ability to utilize the necessary diplomatic means to avoid involvement in Cuban affairs.

In 1874, Fish summarized his approach to the Ten Years' War as secretary of state: "the interest of the United States in Cuba was heightened by a desire that the deadly struggle on the island might end in the acquisition of self-government (whether under, or free from, Spanish rule was of course Immaterial to an American) and in the abolition of slavery."<sup>63</sup> While there had been considerable tension in the United States over Fish's approach, it became the dominant one as the Grant administration promoted and reinforced a pattern of American behavior that simultaneously denied Cuba's right to independence,

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<sup>61</sup> For Fish's summary of this incident, see Fish Admiral Polo de Bernabé, 18 April 1874, *FRUS*, 1875, 1205.

<sup>62</sup> Fish Diary, 12 July 1872 and 20 July 1872, Fish Papers, LOC; Grant to James H. Coggeshall, 24 July 1872; *New York Tribune*, 29 July 1872 all in *Grant Papers*, 23, 209-10; Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, 623.

<sup>63</sup> Fish to Admiral Polo de Bernabé, 18 April 1874, *FRUS*, 1875, 2, 1180.

broadly upheld the Spanish regime while simultaneously berating it for its brutality, and ensured that if there were changes in the balance of power then the US would be able to reap the economic benefits.<sup>64</sup>

While, as has been noted, this approach in part reflected material constraints, it also spoke to ideology, specifically the delicate balance between northern leaders' ideas about the place of the United States in the global order. As David Hendrickson suggests, it is important to recognize the competing arguments that privileged nationalism, internationalism, and imperialism within this discourse at different times. Yet discussions about imperialism did not stand in isolation either from internal developments or relations with the other imperial powers. Just like European imperialism, the growth of American economic and diplomatic power was a dynamic and contradictory series of processes that must be understood as having what Stoler calls "movement and oscillation at the center."<sup>65</sup> In the Cuban case, a developing sense of imperial power in the United States during the 1860s and into the 1870s did not simply mean making a choice of intervention or even annexation over non-involvement. As Fish and his colleagues recognized, US interests on the island gave it considerable influence, so that in some cases a *lack of action* (especially by the government) might be counted as an imperial maneuver.

Yet it is significant that key members of the government of the United States at the time conceived of themselves, and therefore the nation they represented, as being anti-imperial. In Anthony Pagden's words, developing notions of a "shared sovereignty" beyond what the leaders of the United States saw as the natural boundaries of the nation was "unthinkable."<sup>66</sup> These figures believed the development of an American empire in the European sense fundamentally contradicted their view of the United States as a nation, despite its growth depending upon the subjugation and exclusion of native tribal

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<sup>64</sup> Chapin, "Hamilton Fish and the Lessons of the Ten Year's War," 146.

<sup>65</sup> Stoler, "Intimidations of Empire," 9.

<sup>66</sup> Anthony Pagden, "Empire and its Anxieties," *American Historical Review*, 117 (2012), 141-8, 147.



populations and people of color. In this view, while Spain bore much of the responsibility for the way it conducted its colonial policy and fought the Ten Years' War in Cuba, the insurgency's complicity in atrocities and apparent failure to organize itself politically rendered it morally "irresponsible" and therefore lacking the requisite qualities to justify sovereignty and self-determination.<sup>67</sup> In encouraging Spain to form more progressive policies, then, the United States government reaffirmed its own position as a moral leader, while separating itself from its neighbors and, at least to an extent, from the European imperial powers, but aligning itself with notions of "civilization" as it sought to enhance its international status.

While there was significant disagreement about foreign affairs, and specifically the situation in Cuba, during the Reconstruction era and beyond, the development of a body of thought that considered the actions of other powers and used them as reference points as the US sought a more coherent vision of its place in the world is significant. The stance that Grant and Fish took toward Spain was part of a broader response to European imperialism around the world, but especially within the ever-widening US sphere of influence. There is no doubt that they believed they were opposed to European imperial practices because they favored independent nations. Yet because of their developing links with European nations and because they felt themselves to be an ever more important player in the global system, they increasingly and perhaps subconsciously sought to ape aspects of policies practiced by the major European powers, and they expected other nations to follow them. They generally preferred order to the chaos generated by such events as the Ten Years' War and could therefore justify supporting a "civilized" form of empire that sought to better the populations of certain areas while

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<sup>67</sup> See Greg Grandin, "The Liberal Tradition in the Americas: Rights, Sovereignty, and the Origins of Liberal Multilateralism," *American Historical Review*, 117 (2012), 81-2.

holding out the chance of some form of self-rule in the longer term. Thus, the imperial mindset that was crystallizing at this time had profound and long-term consequences.