
Documents: Bleeding Kansas and Spanish Cuba in 1857, A Postscript

translated and edited by Ebba Schoonover and Thomas Schoonover

Introduction

In the summer of 1987, while conducting research in the Archivo del Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores [Archive of the Minister of External Affairs] in Madrid, we came across documents recalling the theme of an edited document which the *Kansas Historical Quarterly* had published in 1976.¹ That earlier Costa Rican document treated the theme of the interrelationship of foreign and domestic policy, drawing upon the evaluation of the meaning of the Kansas-Nebraska dispute and "Bleeding Kansas" for Central America. The James Carter and Ronald Reagan years have reemphasized the peculiar interrelationship of foreign and domestic affairs. Perhaps, however, we do not adequately acknowledge the way other countries have long looked at U.S. politics and society in an effort to gauge the course of their own well-being and security. Despite the convincing power of the contemporary events and personalities, the interrelationship between foreign and domestic policies is old and was widespread and significant in the past.

Ebba Schoonover, from Berlin, Germany, is an adjunct instructor in the Foreign Language Department of the University of Southwestern Louisiana. She teaches French, Spanish, and German. She holds a B.A. and an M.A. from the University of Southwestern Louisiana.

Thomas Schoonover, raised in Winona, Minnesota, is a professor in the History Department of the University of Southwestern Louisiana. He teaches U.S. foreign relations. He holds a B.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota and an M.A. from Louisiana State University.

1. See Thomas Schoonover, "Foreign Relations and Kansas in 1858," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 42 (Winter 1976): 345-52.

In the 1850s, Spanish diplomats, like their Costa Rican counterparts, recognized the potential consequences for Spanish Cuba, and the whole Caribbean region, which might occur from disillusioned U.S. factions. The potential dangers for Cuba would be determined in part from the outcome of the U.S. internal dispute over the question of whether slavery would be allowed into the national territories or whether slavery would even be allowed to continue in the United States. Spanish diplomats recognized that there was a clear, if unspecified, relationship between internal U.S. politics and the peace and tranquility of Cuba. If U.S. politics consumed a large proportion of the energy and wealth of North Americans, Spanish officials believed that they could defend Cuba against any small remnant of filibustering energy and wealth which threatened the island. If northern politicians chose to ameliorate the internal division by indicating to southern politicians to seek compensation abroad for lost opportunities to expand slavery into Kansas and the western territories, then Cuba, Central America, and the whole Caribbean area were in for difficult times. Increasingly, historians of nineteenth-century diplomacy have acknowledged this relationship.²

2. Kinley J. Brauer, "Gabriel García y Tassara and the American Civil War: A Spanish Perspective," *Civil War History* 21 (March 1975): 5-27; Eric Foner, ed., "Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction: A British View," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (August 1975): 381-90; David C. Rankin, ed., "Political Parades and American Democracy: [Belgian] Jean-Charles Houzeau on Lincoln's 1864 Reelection Campaign," *Civil War History* 30 (December 1984): 324-29; Thomas D. Schoonover, "The Mexican Minister Describes Andrew Johnson's 'Swing Around the Circle,'" *Civil War History* 19 (June 1973): 149-61; Thomas D. Schoonover, *Dollars Over Dominion: The Triumph of Liberalism in Mexican-United States Relations, 1861-1867* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Thomas D. Schoonover, *Mexican Lobby: Matias Romero in Washington, 1861-1867* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986).



In 1856, Spanish officials monitored U.S. filibustering in Central America and Mexico in the expectation that a southern success in those areas would either alienate Europe or satiate or divide the United States. In any event, Cuba would become safer, from the Spanish perspective, if U.S. filibustering successes in Central America diverted southern frustration to that region rather than to Cuba, or if confrontations with Europe forced North American power to face in that direction rather than southward, or if internal division in North American society prevented effective use of southern expansionist energies abroad. As the Kansas issue became focal in 1857, Spanish Minister Gabriel García Tassara developed an argument, similar to that of his Costa Rican counterparts as revealed in the translation printed earlier in the *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, that the barometer for a possible storm in Cuba should be placed on the plains of Kansas.

A year earlier, the governor general of Cuba had advanced a variation of Tassara's theme when he argued in a letter, discussing William Walker³ and U.S. filibustering, that peace in Europe's Crimean War would go a long way to assure peace and tranquility in Central America and Cuba. He argued that such a peace would allow European powers to assign sufficient naval power to the Caribbean to deter or to defeat southern filibustering excursions. A brief paragraph from this letter is translated below:

Translations

Extract from I. Diaz de Arguellas to Minister of State, May 20, 1856⁴

... With regard to the views expressed to analyze the internal situation of the island [Cuba] and to evaluate the events which the Central American republics are experiencing, the confirmation of the peace in Europe [ending the Crimean War] would be an event that would best guarantee the preservation of the [security] of Cuba

3. William Walker (1824-1860), an adventurer, invaded Mexico once and Central America four times in the 1850s. When he landed in Honduras in 1860, he was apprehended by the British and executed by a firing squad.

4. I. Diaz de Arguellas to Minister of State, May 20, 1856, Archivo del Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores, Madrid, legajo 2566. The Spanish minister suspected that the Cuban governor general's fears had come true in early 1858. See Spanish Minister to Minister of External Affairs, April 1858, Archivo del Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores, Madrid, legajo 2566.

in regard to the complications which the Central American question and other questions pending with the United States have promoted with that powerful Republic; and despite all these developments, I have the satisfaction to announce to you that the most complete confidence and the tranquility reigns in the whole island. . . .

Extract from Gabriel García Tassara to Prime Minister, December 27, 1857⁵

... At the end of nearly a month of discussion on the Kansas question in the [U.S.] Senate, the recess, which the [U.S.] Congress has allowed itself for the first time during this year's [holiday] season, has brought a short truce which will probably be used by both contending factions to procure an arrangement in their mutual interest; an arrangement covering the terms [and procedures to settle the Kansas matter] because in reality there was never any doubt that Kansas had to become a free state, and the basis upon which one has attacked Mr. [President James] Buchanan consists primarily of his demonstrated readiness to circumvent certain constitutional provisions in exchange for quickly ending a question which lends ammunition to the partisans. In whatever form this matter might be resolved, there is no doubt that the resolution will have great importance.

It seems evident that the proslavery faction is going to consider a policy of annexation and filibustering to obtain compensation for the major and inevitable reverse which its principle [the right to extend the slave system into the national territories] is going to experience [in Kansas]. There are further indications which show that for months, there has been a real movement forming in the South in this direction [that is, favoring compensation via expansion]. To tell you everything that is said and written about the matter would be an endless task. What is important for us to know or to calculate is the range which these potshots might come to have. Cuba is always the grand perspective, but not more than a perspective. What is indeed already clearly seen in that [the filibusterer William] Walker is today more than ever the instrument of this agitation [the

5. Gabriel García Tassara to Prime Minister, December 27, 1857, Archivo del Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores, Madrid, legajo 2566.



slavery faction's dissatisfaction with domestic political outcomes, such as the forthcoming defeat over Kansas] that some supporters [in the United States] have provided him the funds and that they are doing everything possible to sustain him [in Nicaragua]. The support [for Walker] is well indicated by the [public] meetings in Mobile and in New Orleans which are not entirely without significance. . . .

Conclusion

These letters underscore the theme that internal or external events or developments, in this case an American affair, have often affected developments in other areas, in this case the Caribbean. This aspect of historical understanding corresponds to arguments related to "world systems" theory. The links between central or metropole areas (centers which generally have or easily obtain adequate land, labor, and capital, have the capacity to distribute goods and services, and often have surpluses of one or more of these factors of production) and peripheral regions (areas which are persistently short of the factors of production and lack the capacity to distribute goods and services without external assistance) are not merely economic, but entail cultural and political aspects also.⁶

Forty years after Kansas and the question of U.S. slavery had attracted Spanish concern, a new form of U.S. expansion again alerted Spanish officials. A combination of a revived "manifest destiny," Panamericanism, an expansive Monroe Doctrine, and "dollar diplomacy"

struggled to create financial and economic opportunities for the United States in Central America and the Caribbean. At this time Spanish officials still assumed that U.S. internal policy was stimulating external manifestations, such as financial expansion, in the region. They suspected that some of these external manifestations of U.S. economic growth threatened Cuba's security and well-being. The Spanish minister in Central America, disturbed by the effort of a group of U.S. capitalists to create a syndicate to dominate Honduran banking, railroads, and other development projects, insisted that this syndicate "was a menace for Mexico, and even more for us [Spain], given the proximity of Honduran ports [to be controlled by the syndicate] to Cuba."⁷ The Spanish official believed U.S. financiers sought an outlet for their surplus capital in Honduras. He noted, however, that they wanted so tight a control over Honduran national finances that it implied internal, social, and political domination of that country. The Spanish diplomat feared that U.S. insistence upon securing the Honduran situation would lead to lines of action which would threaten the independence of the other countries in the Caribbean region. This was similar to the situation described in the above documents about Kansas and Cuba in 1856-1857 when Spanish diplomats noted that internal U.S. difficulties, through a logical chain of related developments, endangered Cuba's social and political stability and security. The interrelationships between foreign and domestic policies have continued to affect Central America, not only in Cuba of the 1850s and Honduras of the 1890s, but also up to Nicaragua and El Salvador of the 1980s. KH

6. On world systems theory, see Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, Fifteenth-Eighteenth Centuries* 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* 2 vols. (Orlando, Fla.: Academic, 1974, 1980); and Braudel's postscript volume, *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

7. Felipe Ontivero y Serrano to Foreign Minister, December 25, 1987. Archivo del Ministro de Asuntos Exteriores, Madrid, legajo 1608.

