

Clashing over Cuba: The United States, Spain and Britain, 1853–55

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Abstract. Before 1898, the most sustained attempt by the United States to acquire Cuba occurred during the presidency of Franklin Pierce when the debate about slavery was roiling US domestic politics. Spain responded to the threat with a dramatic change of policy: in order to gain the favour and protection of Britain, it ordered that the slave trade to Cuba be ended. This article analyses Pierce's strategy and examines the complex jockeying it precipitated among Washington, London and Madrid. Mining US, British and Spanish archives, it is the first international history of the crisis that Washington's avarice provoked.

Keywords: Franklin Pierce, Britain, Pezuela, Cuba, slave trade, filibustering

Before 1898, the most sustained attempt by the United States to acquire Cuba occurred during the presidency of Franklin Pierce (1853–57) when the debate about slavery was roiling US domestic politics. The Pierce administration's angling for Cuba underlines the abiding desire of the United States to dominate the island, and it also reveals complex jockeying among Washington, London and Madrid. While there are several studies of Pierce's Cuban policy, none includes an analysis of all these international actors, none uses Spanish sources, and none exploits the full array of British documents. Mining US, British and Spanish archives, this article is the first international history of the crisis that Washington's avarice provoked. It provides a case study of the intersection of race and global politics, as well as a clear example of domestic policy constraining foreign expansion.

Spain responded to the threat posed by Pierce's ambitions with a dramatic change to its own Cuba policy. For more than three decades the Spanish authorities had fostered the introduction of slaves from Africa into Cuba in flagrant violation of their treaty obligations with Britain, but in late 1853 – to counter the US threat – they ordered that the slave trade to the island be ended, hoping this would gain the favour and therefore the protection of the British. This article assesses the impact of Madrid's new policy on the

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Cuban upper class, which was torn between loyalty to Spain and the lure of annexation to the United States. It dissects the responses of Washington and London to Madrid's shift. It examines the opportunities that opened for the United States when war broke out between Britain and Russia in early 1854, and also the impact of domestic political concerns, particularly the uproar over the Kansas–Nebraska Act, on Pierce's policy towards Cuba.

Old Dreams

The US desire to annex Cuba has deep roots. It was President Thomas Jefferson who first cast his gaze towards the island. In 1809, he even counselled his successor, James Madison, to make a deal with Napoleon, whose armies occupied Spain: France would give Cuba to the United States and receive a free hand in South America in return.¹

During the administrations of Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, the appetite for Cuba transcended sectional divisions. Southern and Northern statesmen united in greed. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams was as eager to annex Cuba as was President Monroe. But US dreams clashed with the sea that encircled the island – the sea and the British fleet. For London had made it clear that it would not tolerate Cuba's annexation to the United States, and the Royal Navy ruled the waves.

If the United States could not annex Cuba immediately, then it would wait. Time was on its side, as long as the island remained in the hands of feeble Spain. For more than 20 years Cuba disappeared from the concerns of US policy-makers and from the public debate – until 1847 when, in the exultation of a successful war against Mexico, many began anew to look towards Cuba. This led to President James Polk's proposal in 1848 to buy the island and Spain's categorical refusal.

Spain's rebuff settled nothing. The Cuban issue flared up in the United States during the first half of the 1850s. It had as its backdrop the sectional struggle between the South and the North, which had exploded with unprecedented fury in 1846 at the beginning of the war with Mexico: at issue was whether the territories seized from that country would be open to slavery. The clash tore through the two parties that dominated the political life of the United States, the Democrats and the Whigs, and was painfully papered over with the compromise reached by the US Congress in 1850. The

¹ Jefferson to Madison, 27 April 1809, in H. A. Washington (ed.), *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: Taylor and Maury, 1853), p. 444. On US relations with Cuba before 1853: Louis Pérez, *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990), pp. 1–47; Herminio Portell Vilá, *Historia de Cuba y sus relaciones con los Estados Unidos y España*, vol. 1 (La Habana: Jesús Montero, 1938); Basil Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba: 1848–1855* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 11–261.

compromise allowed the entry of California into the Union as a free state. This was traumatic for many Southerners. Until then there had been an equal number of slave and free states in the Union, and therefore in the Senate; now parity was gone.

In the free states a majority of citizens, Whigs and many Democrats, opposed any action, such as the acquisition of Cuba, that would reignite the sectional conflict. The country 'is like a house divided against itself on the slavery agitation', the *New York Herald* asserted. The *Herald*, the newspaper with the largest circulation in the United States, did not oppose in principle the annexation of Cuba, but it believed the time was not right: 'We are busy at home now, we can wait patiently.'² The *New York Journal of Commerce*, voice of the northern merchants, warned: 'The possession of Cuba at this time would open anew the dangerous question relating to slavery and slave territory.'³

In the South, Democrats and some Whigs believed their region had grievously lost with the Compromise of 1850 and felt they must redress the balance by annexing tropical regions suited for slavery. This meant Cuba. With its large population of 420,000 whites (as well as 435,000 slaves and 145,000 free people of colour), the island 'would in a short time make two powerful States', that is, four senators, a Democratic paper enthused.⁴ Other Southerners (mainly Whigs) thought that the compromise had established a sectional peace that was in the South's interest and must not be disturbed. The annexation of Cuba 'will probably reopen and embitter the sectional questions which have threatened and imperilled the existence of the Union', a Whig paper warned.⁵

It might also lead to war. Since the end of the War of 1812, London had treated the United States as a strong regional power. While US vital interests were in North America, British vital interests lay mostly in Europe and India. This asymmetry explains London's behaviour in the 1840s towards Texas and California: the British preferred that neither territory become part of the United States, but it was not in their interest to launch a war to prevent it; they stood aside while Polk crushed Mexico.⁶ This asymmetry also explains Whitehall's acquiescence to the Clayton–Bulwer treaty: Central America had been, since independence, a virtual British protectorate, but in 1850 London bowed to the growing power of the United States and agreed to a de facto condominium. But what about Cuba? Given the colony's economic

² *New York Herald*, 3 July 1850, p. 2 and 9 April, p. 2.

³ *Journal of Commerce* (New York), 23 Aug. 1851, p. 2.

⁴ *Delta* (New Orleans), 6 Nov. 1850, p. 2. For the population figures, Rolando Rodríguez, *Cuba: la forja de una nación*, vol. 1 (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 2005), pp. 108, 126–7.

⁵ *Crescent* (New Orleans), 27 July 1851, p. 2.

⁶ Piero Gleijeses, 'A Brush with Mexico', *Diplomatic History*, 29: 2 (2005), pp. 223–54.

and strategic importance, would Britain abandon its decades-long policy of support for Spanish rule over the island and allow its annexation to the United States?

The Ever Faithful Island

Dependence on slaves warped Cuba's history. As the wave of independence swept Spanish America in the 1810s and 1820s, it was the upper class in almost every colony that led the struggle against Madrid, but not in Cuba. There, the upper class opposed independence because the island's burgeoning plantation economy required the massive importation of slaves from Africa. With them came the nightmare of a slave revolt like the uprising that had rocked Haiti in 1791. Independence was therefore a luxury the Cuban upper class could not afford. Their imperative was to keep importing slaves to toil in the island's growing sugar plantations, and to avoid any action that might disturb the status quo and give the slaves an opportunity to revolt.⁷

By the 1840s, however, divisions fractured the Cuban upper class, composed of both planters and merchants. A minority advocated the end of the slave trade and the gradual abolition of slavery. Free labour, they argued, was more productive than slave labour. Above all, they feared for their lives. There were more slaves than whites on the island. Slave revolts had broken out in several plantations, and a vast slave conspiracy was discovered in 1843. Cuba was a powder keg. Yet most upper-class Cubans continued to embrace the slave trade and the perpetuation of slavery. On one key point, moreover, virtually all members of the upper class agreed that if emancipation were to come, it would have to be only after a slow, protracted process.⁸

Pressured by Britain, the Spanish authorities had declared the slave trade illegal. However, they allowed it to continue in Cuba. For economic reasons: the plantations, they believed, needed more slaves. And for political reasons: the loyalty of the island's upper class depended on Spain's ability to protect slavery. 'rejecting any measure', such as the end of the slave trade, 'that directly or indirectly might threaten its integrity'.⁹ Furthermore, the presence

⁷ Rodríguez, *Cuba*, 1, pp. 4–88; Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁸ Robert Paquette, *Sugar Is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988); Rodríguez, *Cuba*, 1, pp. 89–170; Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833–1874* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), pp. 14–36; Luis Martínez-Fernández, *Torn between Empires: Economy, Society, and Patterns of Political Thought in the Hispanic Caribbean, 1840–1878* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994); Josef Opatrný, *Antecedentes históricos de la formación de la de la nación cubana* (Prague: Ibero-Americana Pragensia, 1986).

⁹ 'Extracto de la Nota de la Dirección de Ultramar sobre la política en la Isla de Cuba', 1855, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid (hereafter AHN), Ultramar, leg. 4645, exp. 55, no. 9.

of great numbers of slaves would intimidate those white Cubans, slave-owners or not, who might be tempted to plot against the metropole because, a Spanish official wrote, all white Cubans understood ‘the danger of any attempt to alter the public tranquillity’.¹⁰ Finally, there were also pecuniary considerations. Spanish officials in Cuba, from the captain-general down, received generous bribes from the slave traders.

Upper-class Cubans also clashed over the island’s loyalty to Spain. In the 1840s, a majority still wanted Cuba to remain Spanish, but a growing number longed to break away from Madrid, not to achieve independence, but to be annexed to the United States. As a leading Cuban historian writes, ‘the idea of their own nation was just beginning to form, and the sincere admiration for the freedom and democracy proclaimed by the United States created illusions’.¹¹ Above all, there was a link that strongly united Cuba and the United States: slavery. If the United States annexed Cuba, slavery in the island would be safe: safe from the pressure of Britain, which might demand emancipation, and safe from the danger of a slave revolt, because US troops would prevent it. Furthermore, if Cuba were part of the United States, the planters could import slaves legally from the US Upper South (just as the states of the US South-West were doing), and the supply of slaves would be assured.¹² ‘Annexation’, a prominent Cuban planter explained, ‘is a calculation; it is the imperious law of necessity, the sacred duty of self-preservation’.¹³ Cuban annexationists sought a peaceful transfer, hoping that the United States would buy the island.

They recoiled, however, from the use of force – which might offer the slaves opportunity to revolt – except in case of extreme danger, that is, if Spain seemed no longer willing or able to uphold slavery on the island. Fear of this calamity grew in 1848, when France abolished slavery, as Britain already had in 1833. Fearful that Spain might cave in to British and French abolitionist pressures, many scions of the upper class turned to the United States with anxious fervour.

Filibustering

There were three ways for the United States to acquire Cuba: war, purchase or filibuster. Under the Whig administrations of presidents Zachary Taylor (1849–50) and Millard Fillmore (1850–53) war and purchase were out of the question. The Whigs opposed the Democrats’ drive for expansion; they

¹⁰ Mariano Torrente, quoted by Martínez-Fernández, *Torn*, p. 27.

¹¹ Rodríguez, *Cuba*, 1, p. 147.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 89–162; Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire*, pp. 14–36; Martínez-Fernández, *Torn*; Opatrny, *Antecedentes*.

¹³ Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros to José Antonio Saco, 19 Oct. 1848, in Federico de Córdova (ed.), *Cartas del Lugareño* (La Habana: Ministerio de Educación, 1951), p. 308.

preferred, in the words of their foremost leader, Henry Clay, to ‘unite, harmonise, and improve what we have than attempt to acquire more’.¹⁴

Therefore, annexationists resorted to filibustering.¹⁵ Two expeditions were launched from the United States to conquer Cuba. The first landed near the town of Cárdenas in May 1850, and the second at Bahía Honda in August 1851. The filibusters were overwhelmingly US citizens: the 605-man Cárdenas expedition included only five Cubans and the 435-man Bahía Honda expedition included only 49.¹⁶ Both expeditions were led by Narciso López, a Venezuelan who had occupied senior positions in the Spanish administration in Cuba and, after falling out of favour, had begun to plot against Spanish rule. His plot was discovered and he fled to the United States.

The filibusters’ plan was to repeat the Texas precedent: they would take control of Cuba, proclaim its independence and, after a brief interval, demand annexation to the United States. Confronted with a *fait accompli* and fearful of provoking the South, the US Senate would dare not refuse. The South’s leading magazine, *De Bow’s Review*, argued: ‘It is difficult to distinguish this case [Cuba], upon principle, from that of the Texan revolution [of 1835–36], when men, and arms, and ammunition were continually being thrown into that country, from our ports, notwithstanding the loud protests of Mexico, with whom we were at peace, and with whom we were bound by all the solemnities of treaty stipulations’.¹⁷

To launch the filibustering expeditions with only a few hundred men signified contempt for Spain’s military power and confidence that the Cubans were ready to revolt. In 1848 and 1849 upper-class Cubans, eager to preserve slavery, had encouraged López to invade but by 1850 they reversed course because there had been no abolitionist pressure from Britain and France. The Spanish authorities had made clear their resolve to uphold slavery, and the illegal slave trade had continued undisturbed. Reassured of Spain’s steadfastness, these upper-class Cubans urged López not to invade. He paid them no heed. When the filibusters landed, no Cubans rallied to them. And the Spanish troops fought well; they proved to be, the *Times*

¹⁴ Clay to Crittenden, 5 Dec. 1843, in Robert Seager (ed.), *The Papers of Henry Clay*, vol. 9 (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), p. 898.

¹⁵ Tom Chaffin, *Fatal Glory: Narciso López and the First Clandestine U. S. War against Cuba* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Robert May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); Robert May, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Jerónimo Becker, *Historia de las relaciones exteriores de España durante el siglo XIX*, vol. 2 (Madrid: Jaime Ratés, 1924), pp. 159–79, 217–27.

¹⁶ For overall figures, Chaffin, *Glory*, pp. 127, 200. For the Cubans, Ramiro Guerra, *Manual de historia de Cuba* (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 1980), p. 477; Vidal Morales y Morales, *Iniciadores y primeros mártires de la revolución cubana*, vol. 2 (La Habana: Moderna Poesía, 1931), p. 132; *Journal of Commerce* (New York), 11 Sept. 1851, p. 2.

¹⁷ *De Bow’s Review* (New Orleans), Aug. 1850, p. 169.

noted, 'faithful, well conducted and resolute'.¹⁸ After landing near Cárdenas, López held the town for less than a day. Upon learning that 2,000 Spanish soldiers were approaching, the filibusters scurried back to their ship and steamed towards Key West. Their next attempt would end in disaster. Many of the filibusters in the Bahía Honda expedition were felled in battle, the others were captured, and many prisoners, including López, were executed.

These executions provoked a wave of outrage in the US South. The *Louisville Journal* noted that 'extensive enlistments for a Cuba expedition are anticipated ... A spirit is aroused among our countrymen which ... nothing but Spanish blood can allay'.¹⁹ The paper, however, was mistaken. The annexationists might be red-blooded, but they were not fools. Few volunteered to face the Spanish troops in Cuba. The *New York Journal of Commerce* was closer to the temper of the people when it wrote, 'adventurers now see that ... to conquer Cuba without the cooperation of her own citizens, or a considerable portion of them, would require a large army. What a handful of men can do ... has been done by López's expedition'.²⁰ There were no attempts to launch new attacks. The filibusters intended to wait until their ranks had swelled into the thousands.

The election of 1852 gave the filibusters comfort. The Whigs were trounced, the Democrats winning huge majorities in both houses of Congress, and President Pierce, a Democrat, was a man to their liking. In his inaugural address Pierce averred: 'the policy of my administration will not be controlled by any timid forebodings of evil from expansion'.²¹ The Democrats were eyeing Hawaii, a large slice of northern Mexico and Samaná Bay in the Dominican Republic; they also wanted to expand US influence in Central America at Britain's expense. But the place of honour went to Cuba. 'Cuba was understood by everyone to be the target of future U. S. expansion', a Pierce biographer writes. 'In choosing the Senate's most outspoken advocate of Cuban annexation, Pierre Soulé, as minister to Madrid, Pierce signalled his future course.'²² Just a few weeks before Pierce's inauguration, in a speech in the Senate, Soulé had celebrated the filibusters and lambasted the Spanish government. 'Let not Spain be deceived', he roared. 'Cuba cannot long be hers.' It would fall into 'our mighty grasp'.²³

¹⁸ *Times* (London), 27 Sept. 1851, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Louisville Journal*, 28 Aug. 1851, p. 3.

²⁰ *Journal of Commerce*, 11 Sept. 1851, p. 2.

²¹ 'Inaugural Address', in James Richardson (ed.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1897*, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1897), pp. 198–9.

²² Peter Wallner, *Franklin Pierce: Martyr for the Union* (Concord, NH: Plaidswede, 2007), p. 133. The best studies of the Pierce administration are Wallner's sympathetic volume and Roy Nichols's *Franklin Pierce: Young Hickory of the Granite Hills* (rev. ed., Newton, CT: American Political Biography Press, 1998).

²³ Soulé, 25 Jan. 1853, *Congressional Globe*, 32d Cong., 2d sess., Appendix, pp. 119–23, 123 quoted.

The British minister, Lord Howden, reported from Madrid that the Spanish government was ‘exceedingly annoyed at the nomination of Mr. Soulé’.²⁴ Annoyed and worried. General Francisco Lersundi, the Spanish prime minister, told Howden that it had been lengthily debated in the Council [of State] whether Mr. Soulé should be received or not’, but the Council had feared that refusal would give Pierce a pretext to attack Cuba. Lersundi spoke very despondingly of the designs of the United States upon Cuba and of their possible success from the too inadequate means at the disposal of Spain to resist them. He said he was very anxious that Britain and France should think seriously whether it suits them that Cuba should be transferred to America, and if not that they should devise means for its protection.

Howden proffered no reassurance, only the advice that ‘it would be the height of imprudence to refuse Mr. Soulé once he had arrived’.²⁵

Soulé’s instructions, written by Secretary of State William Marcy, were restrained. They stated that US offers to purchase Cuba would be inopportune because ‘there is now no hope ... that ... [they] would be favorably received’. Soulé was simply to ascertain ‘what arrangements have been made with Great Britain and France with regard to sustaining the present dominion of Spain over Cuba’.²⁶ Until April 1854, this was the sum total of the instructions Soulé received about the issue.

This seems completely out of character with a president eager to acquire Cuba. US documents, including the papers of Pierce and other key officials, shed very little light on the administration’s intentions towards the island. Historians, therefore, have speculated in different directions. Pierce’s biographer Peter Wallner argues that while the desire to annex Cuba was unambiguous, ‘how this was to be accomplished was unclear ... The Pierce administration had not decided on a policy with regard to Cuba and Spain.’ The lack of a clear plan of action, however, was not the only reason for Pierce’s passivity. ‘Several circumstances’, historian Basil Rauch writes, ‘suggest the possibility that the Pierce administration during its first year expected Cuba to be freed by a filibuster expedition’.²⁷ This makes sense. The filibusters continued to organise undisturbed,²⁸ and they had a new, prestigious chief, former Mississippi governor John Quitman, who had served with Pierce in the Mexican War. Pierce hoped, biographer Roy Nichols concludes,

²⁴ Howden to Clarendon, [3 May 1853,] enclosed in Clarendon to Crampton, 24 May 1853, The National Archives of the UK (hereafter TNA), FO 115/129.

²⁵ Howden to Clarendon, 12 May 1853, *ibid.*

²⁶ Marcy to Soulé, 23 July 1853, in William Manning (ed.), *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Inter-American Affairs 1831–1860*, vol. 11 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, 1946), p. 163.

²⁷ Wallner, *Pierce*, pp. 134–5; Rauch, *Interest*, p. 262.

²⁸ May, *Quitman*, pp. 270–95; Stanley Urban, ‘The Abortive Quitman Filibustering Expedition, 1853–1855’, *Journal of Mississippi History*, vol. 28 (1956): 175–96.

‘that the Cubans, aided by Americans, would revolt and, like Texas, seek admission to the Union as a state’.²⁹ Quitman met top government officials in July 1853 and ‘was very evidently satisfied by what he had learned of administration policy’.³⁰

Meanwhile from Europe came rumblings of war. In 1853 Russia’s policy towards Turkey grew increasingly threatening, and in October war broke out between them. Behind Turkey stood Britain, determined to halt the Russian advance towards the Mediterranean, and Napoleon III, who sought glory and British goodwill. The drift to war between the two western powers and Russia was apparent to all. From Washington the British minister, John Crampton, warned that if Britain went to war against Russia, ‘we must expect to find renewed vitality given to all American “doctrines”, pretensions, and aggressive schemes’,³¹ that is, a growing US threat to Cuba. To face this danger, Spain embarked on a new policy designed to curry British favour. It stoked the wrath, however, of the US government.

The Africanisation of Cuba

In 1850 two countries in the Western Hemisphere – Brazil and Cuba – continued to import slaves from Africa despite the rising fury of Britain, which had embarked on a crusade to stamp out the slave trade and had imposed on Brazil and Spain treaties outlawing it. For the British the crusade had become a question of honour, proof of their moral superiority and a demonstration of their power.

In the spring of 1850, British warships entered Brazilian territorial waters to seize any ship fitted for the slave trade. This caused an uproar in Brazil, but the government in Rio feared that resistance would lead to war. In September 1850, Brazil declared the slave trade piracy. The following July, British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston told the House of Commons, ‘with understandable pride ... that the Brazilian slave trade had concluded’.³²

The slave trade to Cuba, however, continued. ‘The traffic of slaves [is] now solely confined to that part of the world’, the British minister in Madrid complained.³³ The British – government officials and public opinion – were exasperated. They were under no obligation to help the Spanish uphold their rule in Cuba, and they harboured no designs on the island. However, ever since Jefferson’s time the Royal Navy had been the shield that protected the

²⁹ Nichols, *Pierce*, p. 267. Nichols and Wallner are Pierce’s two leading biographers.

³⁰ Rauch, *Interest*, p. 271 quoted; May, *Quitman*, p. 274.

³¹ Crampton to Clarendon, 20 Nov. 1853, Bodleian Library, Oxford (hereafter Bodl), Clarendon Papers, c. 11.

³² Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440–1870* (New York: Touchstone, 1999), p. 744.

³³ Howden to Alcoy, 16 Feb. 1853, AHN, Estado, leg. 8046, exp. 3, no. 25.

colony from US rapacity. Cuba was too rich and too strategically situated to fall into American hands; for the British, it was best that it remain under Spain.

By 1852, however, Madrid's brazen violation of its pledge to end the slave trade to Cuba was straining London's patience. In November, the British chargé delivered a note to the Spanish foreign minister warning that Britain could not promise to protect Cuba if the Spanish persisted 'in refusing their cordial cooperation with Her Majesty's Government for the total and final suppression of the slave trade of Cuba'.³⁴

Pierce, whose desire for Cuba was blatant, was elected at this juncture. This heightened the pressure on Madrid. Noting that the Spanish government had been seeking guarantees of British assistance against a US attack on Cuba, the *Times* wrote in January 1853 that British support of Spain must be contingent on its ending the slave trade to Cuba: 'In balancing the political advantages and evils which might attend the transfer of the island of Cuba to the United States, we are naturally affected by the consideration that, although slavery would be perpetuated, at least the slave trade would cease.'³⁵ A few days later, British Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell echoed this sentiment in a letter to Howden, the British minister in Madrid saying that while it was not in London's interest 'to see Cuba in the hands of any other power than Spain', the British people would welcome 'the destruction of a trade which conveys the natives of Africa to become slaves in Cuba'.³⁶

Thus when the Spanish minister in London, Francisco Javier de Istúriz, approached the new British foreign secretary, Lord Clarendon, in March 1853 seeking support against the aggressive designs of the Pierce administration on Cuba, no assurances were forthcoming. Instead, Istúriz reported, 'as always when for whatever reason I talk about Cuba with these ministers, Lord Clarendon complained about the landings of slaves'.³⁷

Spanish officials deeply resented London's constant accusations impugning the honour of their government. 'The British ... treat our officials [in Cuba] as though they were the natives of one of their colonies', the Spanish foreign minister, the Count of Alcoy, carped in April 1853. He recommended that Spain reinforce its garrison on the island and prepare to fight the Americans 'if we want to keep Cuba or, if we must, lose it without losing

³⁴ Otway to Beltrán de Lis, 7 Nov. 1852, AHN, Estado, leg. 8046, exp. 3, no. 6. On the clash between London and Madrid over the slave trade: Arthur Corwin, *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817-1886* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1967); David Murray, *Odious Commerce: Britain, Spain, and the Abolition of the Cuban Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

³⁵ *Times*, 19 Jan. 1853, p. 4.

³⁶ Russell to Howden, 31 Jan. 1853, TNA, FO 84/903.

³⁷ Istúriz to Primer Secretario de Estado, 22 March 1853, AHN, Estado, leg. 8046, exp. 3, no. 27.

our honor'.³⁸ These brave words were accompanied by a more practical suggestion. 'The situation in Cuba', Alcoy warned, 'requires that we do away with all that can serve as reason or pretext for Britain to look with indifference at the usurpation of the island by another power', that is, the United States.³⁹ Therefore, the government should replace Captain-General Valentín Cañedo, whom the British accused of conniving with the slave trade, with someone 'of great prestige'. Then came the great concession: the new captain-general should end the slave trade 'at whatever cost'.⁴⁰

It took five months for the Spanish government to act on this recommendation. On 23 September 1853, it replaced Cañedo with a man who had no sympathy for slavery, Juan de la Pezuela, and gave him unprecedented instructions: he must 'prevent the introduction of slaves in Cuba'.⁴¹ Pezuela's biographer writes that 'he was incorruptible, and his tenure in Puerto Rico [where he had served as captain-general in 1848–51] had won him the reputation of friend of the blacks' because he had sought to extend some protection to the slaves. This reputation had spread in Cuba among the great slave-owners and slave merchants: 'They spoke of Pezuela as a dangerous innovator, a firm protector of the blacks against their masters and a supporter of emancipation'.⁴²

The news that Madrid had appointed Pezuela captain-general of Cuba provoked anxiety not only among plantation owners and slave merchants on the island, but also among Southerners and government officials in the United States. It gave new life to an old bugbear: the Africanisation of Cuba. The scenario was simple. The British, in a wily bid to prevent the United States from acquiring Cuba, would press weak, decrepit Spain to emancipate all the slaves on the island, knowing full well that the United States would never want Cuba without slavery; Spain would acquiesce, preferring the ruin of the island to its cession to the United States. 'It must end in the Africanisation of Cuba', warned the Washington *Union*, the semiofficial newspaper of the Pierce administration, that is 'the establishment upon that island of some form of barbarous or semi-barbarous negro government or anarchy'.⁴³

This spectre had haunted US officials even before the appointment of Pezuela. The usually sober US minister in Madrid, Daniel Barringer, had reported in December 1852: 'It is said that, as a last resort, to prevent Cuba

³⁸ Primera Secretaría de Estado to Presidente del Consejo de Ministros, 9 April 1853, AHN, Estado, leg. 8048, exp. 2, no. 2.

³⁹ Ministro de Estado to Presidente del Consejo de Ministros, 11 Feb. 1853, AHN, Ultramar, leg. 3548, exp. 4, no. 13.

⁴⁰ Primera Secretaría de Estado to Presidente del Consejo de Ministros, 9 April 1853, AHN, Estado, leg. 8048, exp. 2, no. 2.

⁴¹ Miguel Estorch, *Apuntes para la historia sobre la administración del marqués de la Pezuela en la isla de Cuba* (Madrid: Manuel Galiano, 1856), p. 6.

⁴² Antonio Urbina, *Cheste o todo un siglo (1809–1906): el Isabelino tradicionalista* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1935), pp. 175, 162.

⁴³ *Union* (Washington, DC), 23 Aug. 1853, p. 2.

from falling into the power of the U. States ... secret orders have been issued to emancipate the slaves and place arms in their hands for the conquest and maintenance of their own rule and authority in the island'.⁴⁴ Secretary of State Marcy, in his 2 July 1853, instructions to James Buchanan, the new US minister to Britain, asked him to ascertain if Whitehall sought to bring about the Africanisation of Cuba.⁴⁵

Pezuela arrived in Cuba on 2 December 1853. He earned the praise of British Consul General Crawford. Pezuela 'appears to be actuated by the most sincere desire to do everything in his power to check and put down the [slave] traffic', Crawford told Foreign Secretary Clarendon in April 1854.⁴⁶ Pezuela dismissed senior officials guilty of colluding with the slave traders. He ordered Spanish officials to search plantations for newly imported slaves, instituted an annual registration of slaves, and decreed that all slaves for whom the masters could not show registered titles would be freed. In July 1854 even the *New York Tribune*, flagship of the anti-slavery Whigs and highly suspicious of all things Spanish, conceded: 'There is every appearance of a desire on the part of the Captain-General to put an end to the infamous traffic in our fellow mortals'.⁴⁷ In Cuba 'fear spread through the planters', writes Rolando Rodríguez, author of the best history of the island under Spanish rule.⁴⁸

British officials, who for so many years had berated the Spanish authorities for their connivance with the African slave trade, now penned missive after missive to express their 'satisfaction for the honest efforts' made by Pezuela to suppress the trade. 'It is my agreeable duty', Clarendon wrote Howden on 28 April 1854, 'to instruct Your Lordship to convey to the Spanish Govt the thanks of H M's Govt for the adoption of measures which ... must go far to put a stop to the nefarious traffic which for so many years has been the cause of difference between Britain and Spain'.⁴⁹ Two months later he noted, 'It is again my agreeable duty to thank the Spanish Govt for the firm determination displayed by the Captain Genl of Cuba in regard to the suppression of the Slave Trade.' And a week after that he reiterated the 'thanks and satisfaction' of the British government for Pezuela's actions.⁵⁰

Pezuela did more than act against the slave trade. On 24 May 1854, he established a militia of free blacks with white officers and black non-commissioned officers. Pezuela explained that the militia would help defend Cuba 'if the extraordinary circumstances of the war in Europe' made it

⁴⁴ Barrington to Everett, 14 Dec. 1852, in Manning, *Diplomatic*, 11: 678.

⁴⁵ Marcy to Buchanan, 2 July 1853, *ibid.*, 7: 84–95.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Howden to Calderón de la Barca, 17 May 1854, AHN, Estado, leg. 8047, exp. 9, no. 64.

⁴⁷ *New York Tribune*, 3 Aug. 1854, p. 6.

⁴⁸ Rodríguez, *Cuba*, 1, p. 153.

⁴⁹ Clarendon to Howden, 1 and 28 April 1854, TNA, FO 84/933.

⁵⁰ Clarendon to Otway, 28 June and 5 July 1854, *ibid.*

necessary.⁵¹ His meaning was obvious. Since Britain and France were at war against Russia, the US government, or the filibusters, might be tempted to attack the island. Pezuela's decision, Rodríguez writes, was received by the planters 'like a blow to their heads'.⁵² It confirmed their worst fears. 'Things are rapidly drawing to a crisis in this place and be prepared to hear the worst', a planter wrote to the *Washington Union*. The people of the United States might soon awake to the news 'that the whites of Havana have all been massacred in cold blood'.⁵³

In the United States not even the anti-slavery *New York Tribune* was comfortable with the idea of a black militia. It reported that: 'Every vagabond negro who presents itself is enlisted, and from that moment he is an important personage ... He is allowed to wear his side arms and to insult both women and men with impunity'.⁵⁴ A wild charge, but for whites in the United States – even those who opposed slavery – a black militia was ominous. The *Charleston Courier* was succinct: 'Already these black soldiers fancy themselves equal to white men'.⁵⁵

Spain had embarked on a dangerous gamble. The measures it was taking to cultivate British support against US aggression were bound to increase the danger of that very aggression. Although Pezuela repeatedly asserted that he had no intention of moving against the institution of slavery, many Americans were convinced that his ultimate goal was abolition. Therefore, there was little time to lose, a Southern paper, the *Richmond Enquirer*, warned:

after the Captain General [Pezuela] has promulgated his decree of emancipation ... it will be too late to talk about the annexation of Cuba. ... The history of Haiti admonishes us of the difficulty of conquest under such circumstances. The splendid army of General Leclerc [the French commander in Haiti] could accomplish nothing against the insurgent negroes. ... And what would the conquest avail us after such a struggle?⁵⁶

From Washington, the Spanish minister, Leopoldo de Cueto, warned that the policy adopted by Pezuela was inflaming US public opinion against Spain and giving fodder to those who wanted to seize the island. His stance was clear: Pezuela's policy was foolhardy. 'I disagree', Pezuela countered. To abandon the policy he had adopted 'would be disastrous'. Whereas Cueto focused on the impact of the policy on the United States, Pezuela focused on Britain:

⁵¹ Decree of 24 May 1854 in *Gaceta de la Habana*, 25 May 1854, p. 1. For Pezuela's measures against the slave trade, José Cayuela Fernández, *Bahía de ultramar: España y Cuba en el siglo XIX* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1993), pp. 227–30; Corwin, *Spain*, pp. 114–21.

⁵² Rodríguez, *Cuba*, 1, p. 154.

⁵³ *Union*, 28 June, 1854, p. 2.

⁵⁴ *New York Tribune*, 4 Aug. 1854, p. 5.

⁵⁵ *Courier* (Charleston), 20 June 1854, p. 1.

⁵⁶ *Richmond Enquirer*, 16 May 1854, p. 2.

‘it is because of this policy that we are now appreciated by Britain, which until recently was hostile to us’.⁵⁷

The Kansas–Nebraska Act

Pezuela’s ‘Africanisation’ of Cuba occurred at a time when the United States was again in the throes of sectional conflict. It had been triggered by the attempt, spearheaded by southern Democrats, to repeal the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The compromise had stipulated that in the immense territory of the Louisiana Purchase, slavery would be ‘forever prohibited’ north of 36°30’. In January 1854, however, southern members of Congress convinced Pierce to support a measure that would create two territories – Kansas and Nebraska – north of the 36°30’ line that would be open to slavery.

The struggle that raged for the next three and half months was, according to historian David Potter, ‘of unprecedented intensity’.⁵⁸ The sober *Richmond Whig* lamented,

We have never known such unanimity of sentiment at the North upon any question affecting the rights of the South, as now prevails in opposition to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. We have never witnessed, either, such violence of temper and language – such fanaticism, such madness, such manifest desire to kindle the fires of a purely sectional conflict and drive the South to the alternative of abject submission or stern resistance.⁵⁹

The Democrats controlled both the House and the Senate, but the Kansas–Nebraska Act ruptured the party along the sectional divide. Public opinion in the North was bitterly hostile to repeal and the administration had to work hard, applying ‘whip and spur’ on northern Democrats to garner votes.⁶⁰ Finally, on 4 March the Senate approved the repeal and the battle moved to the House.

On 28 February, in the midst of this struggle, a US merchant ship, the *Black Warrior*, violated regulations of the port of Havana (regulations that had not previously been enforced) and was seized by the Spanish authorities and fined \$6,000. It was ‘a real instance of Spanish stupidity’, British Foreign Secretary Clarendon groused, for it unnecessarily provoked the United States.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Cueto to the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, 13 June 1854, AHN, Ultramar, leg. 4645, exp. 12, no. 43; Pezuela to Cueto, 10 July 1854, *ibid.*, exp. 26, no. 3.

⁵⁸ David Potter, *The Impending Crisis 1848–1861* (New York: Harper, 1976), p. 165.

⁵⁹ *Richmond Whig*, 20 March 1854, p. 2.

⁶⁰ Potter, *Crisis*, p. 166.

⁶¹ Clarendon to Crampton, 7 April 1854, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter LOC), Manuscript Division, American Material in the Clarendon Papers 1853–1870, reel 9. On the *Black Warrior* incident: Amos Ettinger, *The Mission of Pierre Soulé to Spain 1853–1855: A Study in the Cuban Diplomacy of the United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1932), pp. 250–90; Becker, *Historia*, 2, pp. 304–10, 327–36.

The Pierce administration expressed outrage at Spain's action and demanded a heavy indemnity. Attorney General Caleb Cushing urged 'drastic action', beginning with a blockade of Cuba, and he was supported by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis.⁶² Secretary of State Marcy, however, urged restraint. The moment was not opportune, as the battle for Kansas–Nebraska was on. 'The truth', Crampton, the British minister in Washington, reported, 'is [that] the Nebraska question, although it was got through the Senate, is going all wrong in the House and in the country, while Pierce, by suddenly throwing himself into the arms of the South on that matter ... has injured himself irreparably in the North'.⁶³ In March an election in Pierce's home state, New Hampshire, resulted in heavy losses for the Democrats. Sobered, Pierce heeded Marcy's advice. The *Black Warrior* crisis was defused as Spain released the ship and remitted the fine.

On 22 May 1854, the House approved the Kansas–Nebraska Act by a vote of 113 to 100. All but two of the 59 southern Democrats voted in favour, but half of the 88 northern Democrats bolted. The Whigs also split on sectional lines. For the South it was a Pyrrhic victory. There was no real possibility that slavery could be established in Kansas or Nebraska, and the act strengthened northern fears of an aggressive South bent on dominating the Union, while it gutted support for the administration.

It also cast the issue of Cuba in a crude sectional light. It hardened the northern Whigs' opposition to the acquisition of the island. Southern Whigs, too, opposed annexation because it would deepen the sectional conflict, and, in any case, they dismissed the threat of Africanisation. 'I do verily believe', Senator John Clayton (W-Del.) said, 'that nothing is further from the intention of the Spanish government at this very time than to pursue a policy so suicidal, so destructive to her own interests, so injurious to us, and so infamous, as that of attempting to Africanise Cuba by means of the emancipation of the slaves'.⁶⁴ Clayton's view was shared by major Whig newspapers in the Slave States. The *Louisville Journal* believed that there was 'not the slightest evidence' that Spain intended to Africanise Cuba. The *Richmond Whig* asserted that the United States 'has only to wait patiently for the natural course of events' to obtain the island. 'With a terrible war [against Russia] on their hands ... [the British] would not interfere if the United States took possession of Cuba', the New Orleans *Commercial Bulletin* predicted, before cautioning that the raging sectional conflict meant the United States must hold back.⁶⁵

⁶² Claude Fuess, *The Life of Caleb Cushing*, vol. 2 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923), p. 163.

⁶³ Crampton to Clarendon, 20 March 1854, Bodl, Clarendon Papers, c. 24.

⁶⁴ Clayton, 22 May 1854, *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st sess., p. 1259.

⁶⁵ *Louisville Journal*, 29 May 1854, p. 2; *Richmond Whig*, 29 May 1854, p. 2; *Commercial Bulletin* (New Orleans), 1 June 1854, p. 2.

When Pierce had been elected, the Democratic Party, North and South, had seemed united on the need to acquire Cuba. Many northern Democrats had harboured reservations, fearing that the island's annexation would rekindle the sectional conflict, but they had rallied behind Pierce, a man whose desire to acquire Cuba was evident. 'The Democrats of 1852 meant to resume where Polk had left off', David Potter concludes. They wanted Cuba.⁶⁶

Party unity fractured, however, in early 1854 when so many northern Democrats, at the administration's behest, ran roughshod over their constituents' feelings by supporting the Kansas–Nebraska Act. With Congressional elections approaching, northern Democrats did not want to provoke their constituents again – and this meant looking askance at any attempt to acquire Cuba.⁶⁷

After the Kansas–Nebraska debacle, southern Democrats were almost alone in demanding that the United States acquire Cuba. 'Better by purchase than by conquest', the *Richmond Enquirer* asserted, but if Spain resisted, then by war.⁶⁸ Pierce must act without delay, the New Orleans *Delta* insisted: 'Inaction ... is fatal to the very existence of the Union and the independence of the South. ... When the slaves are once emancipated, there is no power, no law that could ever reduce them to slavery'.⁶⁹

The urgent demands for the annexation of Cuba were echoed by the Washington *Union*. This was significant because the *Union* usually spoke for the administration.⁷⁰ On 24 March 1854 it noted: 'The indications are daily multiplying that we are not long to enjoy uninterrupted peace with Spain. We feared as much when we saw Pezuela appointed captain-general of Cuba ... because of his known inveterate hostility to the United States and their institutions.' The British government, the *Union* explained, had urged Spain to appoint Pezuela because 'it had confidence that he could be employed under its dictation as an instrument to Africanise that beautiful island'.⁷¹ The British, the *Union* thundered,

would rather see the island sunk into the sea than it should pass into the hands of the American people; and Spain has united with France and Britain in attempting the next thing to that – that being to render Cuba both valueless to us as an acquisition and the citadel where the enemies of the American Union may safely concoct and consummate their plots.⁷²

⁶⁶ Potter, *Crisis*, p. 181.

⁶⁷ Nichols, *Pierce*, pp. 340–2, 352–4; Wallner, *Pierce*, pp. 136–7, 143–4; *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Cong., 1st sess., pp. 1021–5, 1257–61.

⁶⁸ *Richmond Enquirer*, 16 May 1854, p. 2.

⁶⁹ *Delta*, 23 May 1854, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Wallner, *Pierce*, p. 148; Nichols, *Pierce*, p. 279.

⁷¹ *Union*, 24 March 1854, p. 3.

⁷² *Union*, 16 May 1854, p. 2.

This provoked the British government. Foreign Secretary Clarendon urged Crampton to complain to Marcy: 'You must lay great stress upon the *Union*'s insults to us', he insisted. 'We are the last people to complain of the Press, but here is a paper paid by the Government and therefore under its control.'⁷³

Pierce and his aides might have been using the *Union* to intimidate Spain in the hope of forcing it to sell Cuba, but there is no doubt that they took the threat of Africanisation seriously. Pierce, historian Robert May writes, 'was nearly as worried' as were the southern Democrats 'about Cuba's Africanization'.⁷⁴

The Response of the US Government

On 15 March 1854, Secretary of State Marcy instructed a secret agent, Charles Davis, to go to Cuba to investigate whether Spain had embarked on the Africanisation of the island. Davis reported on 22 May: 'The conclusion is irresistible that the emancipation of the slaves and consequent Africanization of the island is the true object had in view, and to which the march is as rapid as circumstances will allow.'⁷⁵ Marcy received the same assessment from the US consul in Havana, Alexander Clayton, and from Clayton's successor, William Robertson.⁷⁶

This added a sense of urgency to the administration's policy towards Cuba, which for more than a year had simply allowed the filibusters to organise undisturbed. At the same time, opportunities for a more active policy beckoned. Soulé, the US minister in Madrid, reported on 23 February 1854 that Spain was bankrupt, politically and economically, and 'contingencies are likely to arise of a most interesting character to the Government of the United States'. He may have been alluding to the deepening internal strife in Spain or the approaching war between Britain and Russia, or both. He added, on 8 March: 'The time is not far distant when I may have a chance of playing a bold card.'⁷⁷ Three weeks later France and Britain declared war on Russia, and Spain seemed bereft of protectors. Against this backdrop, on 3 April 1854, Marcy instructed Soulé to try to buy Cuba for as much as US\$ 130 million (about US\$ 3.5 billion today). If purchase was not possible, Marcy

⁷³ Clarendon to Crampton, 22 Sept. 1854, LOC, Clarendon Papers, reel 9.

⁷⁴ Robert May, *Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Future of Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 115.

⁷⁵ Marcy to Davis, 15 March 1854, in Manning, *Diplomatic*, 11, pp. 170–3; Davis to Marcy, 22 May 1854, *ibid.*, p. 789 quoted.

⁷⁶ Clayton to Marcy, no. 3, 5 Dec. 1853, National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter NA), Department of State (hereafter DOS), Despatches from U. S. Consuls in Havana, M899, roll 26; Robertson to Marcy, no. 21, 27 Jan. 1854, *ibid.*, roll 27; Robertson to Marcy, 20 March 1854, in Manning, *Diplomatic*, 11: 748–9.

⁷⁷ Soulé to Marcy, 23 Feb. 1854, in Manning, *Diplomatic*, 11: 737–9, 738 quoted; Soulé to Marcy, no. 12, 8 March 1854, NA, DOS, Despatches from U. S. Ministers to Spain, 1792–1906, M31, roll 38.

wrote, Soulé should direct his efforts ‘to the next most desirable object, which is to detach the island from the Spanish dominion and from all dependence on any European power’.⁷⁸

What did Marcy mean by ‘detach’? According to two well respected US historians, ‘by *detach* Marcy meant to say that the independence of Cuba was the object’, not annexation.⁷⁹ This is splitting hairs. At the time Americans believed that the island’s independence would be an ephemeral way station on the road to annexation as had been the case for Texas. Thus Soulé, that furious annexationist, had used ‘independence’ and ‘annexation’ interchangeably in his January 1853 Senate speech, and he had concluded that Cuba must belong to the United States. Cuba’s independence would have violated the Pierce administration’s goal of acquiring the island; it would have been an open rebuff to the South, and it would have been opposed even by those Cubans who sought separation from Spain. Independence, except as an interlude leading to annexation, was the goal of the power brokers neither in the United States nor in Cuba.

Soulé had been agitating for the US purchase of Cuba before receiving Marcy’s 3 April 1854 instructions, and after receiving them he was indefatigable.⁸⁰ He courted the queen mother, the queen, Spanish officials, as well as opposition leaders who were plotting to overthrow the government. He told everyone that Spain should sell Cuba to the United States, and when the Spaniards paid no heed, he blustered and threatened. ‘The evident object of Mr. Soulé is to produce a plausible quarrel between Spain and the United States’, the British minister, Howden, reported.⁸¹

But the Pierce administration was hobbled by the uproar caused by the battle over Kansas–Nebraska. On 25 May 1854 Marcy wrote in a private letter to John Mason, the US minister in Paris:

The Nebraska bill has not yet but will shortly become a law. From this which has proven a very troublesome matter we shall at once enter upon another still more embarrassing – the Cuban question. Upon this question I shall probably soon communicate with you officially. The course to be pursued in this matter is not definitively settled, and I tell you is not one easily settled.

The next day he wrote Buchanan: ‘The Nebraska question being now disposed of, the most important matter to come up will be Cuba. It is under advisement, but the course to be taken, unsettled.’⁸²

⁷⁸ Marcy to Soulé, 3 April 1854, in Manning, *Diplomatic*, 11: 175–8, 177 quoted.

⁷⁹ Philip Klein, *President James Buchanan: A Biography* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1962), p. 238 quoted, emphasis in original; Nichols, *Pierce*, pp. 370–1.

⁸⁰ For Soulé in Spain: Ettinger, *Mission*; Becker, *Historia*, 2, pp. 299–309.

⁸¹ Howden to Clarendon, 21 April 1854, TNA, FO 115/138.

⁸² Marcy to Mason, 25 May 1854, LOC, Manuscript Division, William L. Marcy Papers, 1806–1930, box 80, (hereafter Marcy Papers); Marcy to Buchanan, 26 May 1854, *ibid.*

The administration's next move stunned most observers. On 31 May Pierce, who had never uttered a word of condemnation against the filibusters, issued a proclamation stating that filibustering against Cuba contradicted the letter and the spirit of US–Spanish treaties. Federal authorities, he added, would ‘not fail to prosecute with due energy all those who ... presume thus to disregard the laws of the land and our own treaty obligations’.⁸³

The evidence suggests, as historian Robert May explains, that Pierce ‘intended his proclamation more as a symbolic gesture to soothe northern opinion than as a signal of truly substantive change in administration intent’. Pierce intimated to a southern congressman that the administration would refrain from enforcement measures provided the filibusters conducted their preparations with some discretion.⁸⁴ Indeed, with one exception – in all likelihood the consequence of a rogue judge – no enforcement action was taken until January 1855, even though the filibusters’ preparations were anything but discreet.⁸⁵

The proclamation reflected a change in the administration’s assessment of the filibusters’ ability to seize Cuba. They had promised much but delivered nothing. ‘For more than two years the filibusters have been announcing the departure of a new expedition’, the Spanish minister reported from Washington in August 1854. ‘But the truth is that ... they don’t have the means or the confidence to carry out a major operation. The lesson of the tragic end of López’s expedition has been seared into them.’ The British minister agreed: ‘Ever since the López affair, I have expressed the opinion that no Filibusters’ expedition against Cuba will leave the United States’, he wrote Clarendon on 8 June 1854.⁸⁶

The filibusters had become a liability for the president: northern opinion damned them as a tool of the South. They also complicated his Cuban policy. Pierce had decided to make a serious attempt to purchase Cuba and, as May, the foremost authority on filibustering, asserts, the filibusters ‘impeded’ this strategy by antagonising Spanish officials.⁸⁷ The assistant secretary of state, a fervent annexationist, urged Marcy ‘not to let the filibusters of Louisiana create any mischief’.⁸⁸

The Washington *Union*, which reflected administration sentiment, argued that the right policy for the United States was to purchase Cuba from Spain. Should this attempt fail, the only resort would be war. The *Union* wrote in June 1854:

⁸³ ‘A Proclamation’, in Richardson, *Compilation*, 5: 272–3.

⁸⁴ May, *Quitman*, p. 284.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 285–7.

⁸⁶ Cueto to Calderón de la Barca, 22 Aug. 1854, AHN, Ultramar, leg. 4645, exp. 47, no. 3; Crampton to Clarendon, 8 June 1854, Bodl, Clarendon Papers, c. 24.

⁸⁷ May, *Quitman*, p. 284.

⁸⁸ Dudley Mann to Marcy, 31 Aug. 1854, Marcy Papers, box 52.

Cuba is becoming as essential to us now as was Louisiana at the time of its purchase ... The day may be near at hand when, acting upon the Burke principle [of self-preservation] we may have to present to the government of Madrid the purse in one hand and the sword in the other, and say to it Take Your Choice.⁸⁹

Meanwhile, Soulé was relentless. When insurrection broke out in Madrid in July he wrote to Secretary of State Marcy: 'What a moment for taking in our own hands that question of Cuba, which it seems almost impossible we may hereafter be able to adjust in any other way than by force of arms!'.⁹⁰ He tried to bribe the queen and plotted with the Republican groups in Madrid, all to no avail. Spain was bankrupt, indebted to foreign governments, riven by scandals and corruption, and torn by internal strife, but it was folly to expect that any Spanish government would sell Cuba.

US officials nevertheless held out hope. From Europe, Secretary Marcy received contradictory advice. The US minister in Paris, John Mason, was optimistic that Spain would agree to sell, and Marcy's deputy, Dudley Mann, who was also in Paris, was ebullient: 'I look upon it almost as good as accomplished', he wrote to Marcy on 31 August 1854. 'Spain must have money or sink in a state of anarchy', he explained in a letter four days later. Britain and France, embroiled in war against Russia, could not spare money – only the United States could. Spain would have to sell Cuba to the United States: 'The chances for obtaining it have been constantly increasing until I now think under good management there is almost certainty of success.' From Madrid, Soulé's deputy sent a more sober message, telling Marcy that 'the peaceable cession of the Island of Cuba by Spain to us at this time is impossible'.⁹¹

The correctness of this assessment soon became clear. The new Spanish authorities were categorical. They would not sell Cuba under any circumstances. After the high hopes of the summer, the Pierce administration was running out of options. Purchase was a fading hope and filibustering a receding mirage. There was a third way: war – an option that Pierce had never embraced, but neither had he rejected it.

War Clouds over Cuba

The US, British and Spanish sources shed little light on Pierce's assessment of the risks of launching war to seize Cuba. On the one hand, there appeared to be an opportunity. For the first time since Jefferson had lusted after Cuba, the

⁸⁹ *Union*, 23 June 1854, p. 2.

⁹⁰ Soulé to Marcy, no. 28, 18 July 1854, NA, DOS, Despatches from U. S. Ministers to Spain, M31, Roll 38.

⁹¹ Mason to Marcy, 5 July 1854, Marcy Papers, box 50; Mann to Marcy, 31 Aug., 4 Sept. 1854, *ibid.*, box 52; Perry to Marcy, 6 Sept. 1854, *ibid.*

British shield seemed absent because Britain was at war with Russia. On 14 September 1854, British and French troops landed in the Crimea and began their advance towards Sebastopol, Russia's major naval base on the Black Sea. For the next year, Britain's attention would be riveted on the Crimea and the bloody battles in that distant land. The British complained that the Pierce administration was seeking to take advantage of the war. 'Our relations with the U. States are clearly becoming more and more difficult every day', Prime Minister Lord Aberdeen noted a few days after the British troops had landed in the Crimea. Crampton, the British minister in Washington, warned that the Pierce administration was 'about as dangerous a one as we have ever had to deal with'.⁹²

The British, however, also recognised that the sectional conflict inflamed by the Kansas–Nebraska Act complicated the president's designs on Cuba. When the *Black Warrior* incident erupted in March 1854, the government in London had feared that Pierce might exploit the crisis to declare war on Spain,⁹³ but Crampton had not worried. 'I am assured by well informed Senators', he wrote to Clarendon, 'that nothing like a two thirds majority, which is necessary for a war, can be found in that body'.⁹⁴

Would Britain have intervened if the United States had tried to seize Cuba? British documents provide no clear answer. A clue is a remark by Clarendon in December 1854 explaining why the government had decided not to ask the Spanish prime minister to send '3 or 4 regiments' to join the fight against the Russians in Crimea. Madrid would demand a quid pro quo. Spain 'would be sure to want to bind us to the defense of Cuba and *though we might be inclined to do that if the island was regularly attacked by the US Gov[ernment]*, it would not do to enter into any engagement for the purpose'.⁹⁵ Nor does the correspondence of Buchanan, the US minister in London, shed light on how the British would have responded to a US invasion of Cuba. Buchanan was confident that if the United States could buy Cuba, 'no serious difficulties would be interposed' by the British government.⁹⁶ But there is no record that he and Clarendon ever discussed what would happen if the United States attacked Cuba.

British historian Kenneth Bourne, the foremost authority on the subject, points out that while the war with Russia 'did force still further withdrawals of [British] troops from North America, the [British] navy was not nearly so

⁹² Aberdeen to Clarendon, 25 Sept. 1854, British Library, London, Western Manuscripts, Add MS 43189, Correspondence of the Prime Minister, Lord Aberdeen, with the Foreign Sec., Lord Clarendon: March 1854–November 1859, v. CLI; Crampton to Clarendon, 10 Sept. 1854, Bodl, Clarendon Papers, c. 25.

⁹³ Clarendon's Notes on Letters to Crampton, 16 May 1854, Bodl, Clarendon Papers, c. 224.

⁹⁴ Crampton to Clarendon, 29 May 1854, *ibid.*, c. 24.

⁹⁵ Clarendon to Crampton, 16 Dec. 1854, emphasis added, LOC, Clarendon Papers, reel 9.

⁹⁶ Buchanan to Marcy, 11 July 1854, Marcy Papers, box 80.

pressed, and warships remained available to reinforce American waters. Indeed rather than presenting the United States with a real opportunity to exploit a diversion, the Crimean War threatened at last to realize [Prime Minister] Aberdeen's ambition of an effective Franco-British alliance'.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, even if Britain (possibly with French support) could have repelled a US attack on Cuba, would it have done so? War against the Yankees would have added a terrible burden (the loss of trade with the United States) to a Britain already straining under the weight of the Crimean War: 'Whatever may be the causes of transient differences between the Government of this country and that of the United States', the *Times* wrote in August 1854, 'these controversies and disputes bear no comparison to the enormous common interests of two great nations'.⁹⁸ Lord Palmerston, who replaced Aberdeen as prime minister in February 1855, believed that the only way to deal with 'vulgar minded Bullies, and such unfortunately the people of the United States are', was to be firm, but he also acknowledged that 'a quarrel with the United States is at all times undesirable and is especially so when we are engaged in war with another power'.⁹⁹ Furthermore, while the Crimean War would not have seriously diminished British naval capabilities in a conflict with the United States, it would have made it very difficult for London to have sent reinforcements to defend Canada from a US invasion.

The clues suggest that if the United States had attacked Cuba the British would have been most reluctant to intervene in the midst of the Crimean War. This created an opening for Washington. But Pierce could not take advantage of this opportunity because the battle over the Kansas–Nebraska bill crippled his freedom of action. Denounced throughout the North as a tool of the southern slave-owners, Pierce could ill afford to provide his critics with additional fodder. 'To tell you an unwelcome truth', Marcy wrote the US minister in France in July 1854, 'the Nebraska question has sadly shattered our party in all the free states, and deprived it of that strength which was needed and would have been much more profitably used for the acquisition of Cuba'.¹⁰⁰

The administration was torn between its desire to acquire Cuba and its need to quell the sectional conflict at home. And so, at Pierce's behest, Marcy turned to the three most senior US diplomats in Europe for counsel. On 16 August 1854, he instructed Soulé to meet with his colleagues in London and Paris, Buchanan and Mason, 'to consult together ... and to adopt

⁹⁷ Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815–1908* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), p. 179.

⁹⁸ *Times*, 17 Aug. 1854, p. 6.

⁹⁹ Palmerston, 'Mem[orandum] on a Draft of Despatch from Ld. Clarendon to Mr. Crampton at Washington', 2 Sept. 1854, Hartley Library, University of Southampton, MS 62 Palmerston Papers, PP/MM/US/11/1.

¹⁰⁰ Marcy to Mason, 23 July 1854, Marcy Papers, box 80.

measures for perfect concert of action in aid of your negotiations at Madrid [to buy Cuba]'.¹⁰¹ The three ministers met in Ostend, Belgium on 9 October to prepare a secret report for the president, the notorious Ostend Manifesto. After noting that the United States 'could not permit Cuba to be Africanised', they asserted: 'The Union can never enjoy repose, nor possess reliable security, as long as Cuba is not embraced within its boundaries.' They argued that the administration should make one final attempt to purchase Cuba; if Spain refused, the 'law of self-preservation' demanded that the United States seize the island by force.¹⁰²

The Ostend Manifesto has long occupied a special place in the history of nineteenth-century US foreign policy. It was, a prominent historian asserts, 'incredible'.¹⁰³ Its language is turgid, bombastic and its spirit is nakedly aggressive. Its recommendation, however, is consistent with Marcy's 3 April 1854 instructions to Soulé: if purchase proved impossible, then the United States must 'detach' the island from Spain. It is also consonant with an important theme in US policy: the propensity to use force to grab territory from weaker neighbours. This had been the keynote of US relations with the Indian tribes and with Spain as well, as exemplified by the history of the US acquisition of the Floridas. After buying Louisiana from Napoleon, Jefferson made the spurious claim that West Florida (the panhandle to the Mississippi) had been included in the purchase. His successor, James Madison, had then taken West Florida by force. And it was at gunpoint that President Monroe acquired East Florida (the peninsula) in 1819, despoiling Spain of its last possession in North America east of the Mississippi. President Polk's policy against Mexico was as aggressive as that proposed by the Ostend Manifesto against Spain.

The acquisitive spirit of the Ostend Manifesto was, therefore, true to past US practice towards weak neighbours. But its timing was terrible: the Manifesto clashed with the political reality created by the Kansas–Nebraska Act. Buchanan, Mason and Soulé, the three authors of the Manifesto, took no account of the storm the Kansas–Nebraska Act had created in the United States. This was what made the Manifesto a crass political blunder. To make matters worse, the Democrats in the free states suffered heavy losses in the Fall 1854 mid-term elections. While in 1852 Democrats had carried every free state except Vermont and Massachusetts, two years later

¹⁰¹ Marcy to Soulé, 16 Aug. 1854, in Manning, *Diplomatic*, 11: 193.

¹⁰² Buchanan to Marcy, 18 Oct. 1854, in John Bassett Moore (ed.), *The Works of James Buchanan* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1909), 9: 260–6. Also Ettinger, *Mission*, pp. 339–68.

¹⁰³ Robert May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854–1861* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), p. 68.

they lost all but New Hampshire and California, thereby ceding control of the House of Representatives.¹⁰⁴

Under these circumstances, there was no way that Pierce could have followed the prescriptions of the Ostend Manifesto. It was a non-starter. The president's support of the Kansas–Nebraska Act had branded him as hopelessly pro-South in the eyes of most northerners and led them to consider the annexation of Cuba yet another sectional ploy. The policy advocated in the Ostend Manifesto, therefore, would have offered further proof to these critics that the administration had sold out to the southern slavocracy. This was made blatant when the Manifesto was leaked (probably by a garrulous Buchanan aide) to the *New York Herald*, which began publishing increasingly accurate reports of its contents in late October.¹⁰⁵ A firestorm ensued. Confronted with a mounting wave of criticism in the North, Pierce ran for cover. On 13 November, in a sharp letter to Soulé (that was soon shared with Congress), Marcy rejected the Manifesto as wholly inconsistent with the administration's peaceful policy.¹⁰⁶

'The Ostend Manifesto and the Kansas–Nebraska Act were the two great calamities of Franklin Pierce's presidency', David Potter writes.¹⁰⁷ The fundamental calamity, however, was the Kansas–Nebraska Act. It inflamed northern fears and rendered the prescriptions of the Ostend Manifesto dead on arrival.

Pezuela's Dismissal

Amidst this debacle, the administration could point to one piece of good news:

Pezuela had been recalled on 2 August 1854. The threat of 'Africanisation' had passed.

The generals who had seized power in Spain the previous month had close ties, personal and economic, with the great slave-owners and slave merchants of Cuba.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, senior officials in Madrid argued, Pezuela's policies had provoked 'a general and profound disgust' among the very men who should have been the pillars of Spanish rule over Cuba, the great plantation owners of the island.¹⁰⁹ Spanish fears that Pezuela's policies might precipitate a US invasion added to the reasons for his dismissal. 'The United States had

¹⁰⁴ Nichols, *Pierce*, pp. 360–5; Wallner, *Pierce*, pp. 158–67.

¹⁰⁵ *New York Herald*: 28 Oct. 1854, p. 2; 29 Oct., p. 4; 31 Oct., p. 2; 7 Nov., p. 4; 11 Nov., p. 4; 14 Nov., p. 2. On the leaking of the Manifesto, Nichols, *Pierce*, p. 366.

¹⁰⁶ Marcy to Soulé, 13 Nov. 1854, in Manning, *Diplomatic*, 11: 196–201.

¹⁰⁷ Potter, *Crisis*, p. 192.

¹⁰⁸ José Cayuela Fernández, 'Los capitanes generales ante la cuestión de la abolición', in Francisco de Solano and Agustín Guimerá (eds.), *Esclavitud y derechos humanos, la lucha por la libertad del negro en el siglo XIX* (Madrid: CSIC, 1990), pp. 415–53.

¹⁰⁹ 'Extracto de la Nota de la Dirección de Ultramar sobre la política en la Isla de Cuba', 1855, AHN, Ultramar, leg. 4645, exp. 55, no. 9.

encouraged the removal of one of the few honest and progressive Spanish rulers that Cuba ever had', an authoritative Cuban historian, Herminio Portell Vilá, wrote.¹¹⁰ The British lamented Pezuela's departure. Clarendon expressed 'extreme regret' and urged Howden 'to impress' upon the Spanish government 'the importance of carrying out what Pezuela had begun so well'.¹¹¹

Pezuela was replaced by General José de la Concha, a former captain-general of Cuba. 'The slave-owners already knew him and had no fear that he might attack their vital interests', another Cuban historian notes.¹¹² On 21 September 1854, Concha arrived in Havana, where the great plantation owners expressed their relief: 'The entire island can breathe, at last', a handbill proclaimed. 'The slab of lead that was suffocating us has disappeared... General Concha has returned to Havana for the good, the happiness of our island, to deliver us from the burden that was crushing us.'¹¹³ Spain's new rulers returned to the policies followed before Pezuela's tenure in Cuba: they loudly condemned the slave trade while fostering it *sotto voce* as essential to the island's economy and the loyalty of its elites. Pezuela's measures against the trade were revoked.¹¹⁴

Spain no longer needed to court British goodwill. The threat from the United States was dissipating. The fracas over the Ostend Manifesto reassured Madrid: Pierce would have to abandon 'his aggressive policy against Cuba', Concha predicted.¹¹⁵ The filibusters were a spent force. 'I am ready for all eventualities', Concha told the Spanish minister in Washington. If the filibusters invaded, they would share 'the fate of López'.¹¹⁶ But they did not invade. Harassed by federal officials and haunted by López's fate, they gave up. Their fiery leader, Quitman, resigned in April 1855, and the movement collapsed.

Opportunity Squandered

Pierce's annual message in December 1854 included a lengthy section on foreign affairs, but not one word about Cuba. The less said the better.¹¹⁷

It is easy to poke fun at Soulé – he was a most inept diplomat. But even if Soulé had been the most accomplished negotiator, the Spaniards would not

¹¹⁰ Portell Vilá, *Historia*, 2: 95.

¹¹¹ Clarendon to Howden, 14 and 15 Aug. 1854, Bodl, Clarendon Papers, c. 215.

¹¹² Fernando Portuondo, *Historia de Cuba 1492–1898* (La Habana: Pueblo y Educación, 1965), p. 371.

¹¹³ Estorch, *Apuntes*, pp. 120–1.

¹¹⁴ Cayuela Fernández, *Bahía*, pp. 235–7.

¹¹⁵ Concha to the Spanish minister in Mexico, 25 Jan. 1855, AHN, Ultramar, leg. 4645, exp. 55, no. 12.

¹¹⁶ Concha to Cueto, 28 Jan. 1855, *ibid.*, exp. 55, no. 15 and no. 16.

¹¹⁷ 'Second Annual Message', in Richardson, *Compilation*, 5: 273–93.

have sold Cuba, under any circumstances. As the Spanish foreign minister said, they would have preferred to fight a hopeless war and lose it ‘without losing our honour’.¹¹⁸ This is exactly what they did in 1898.

The Spanish government confronted two sets of pressures in 1853: the aggressive stance of the incoming Pierce administration eager to acquire Cuba, and the wrath of the British government. Seething over Madrid’s failure to end the slave trade to Cuba, the British threatened to withdraw their support for Spanish rule in Havana at the very moment that this support appeared indispensable because of the US menace. These divergent pressures led the Spanish government to an unprecedented decision. It would prevent the importation of slaves into Cuba. This new policy, executed with brio in 1854 by a new captain-general with abolitionist sympathies, pleased the British but horrified the United States’ government and slave-owners.

President Pierce had come to power with an intense desire to acquire Cuba but no clear strategy to achieve it. During his first year he had hoped that the filibusters would do the job. By the time he understood that they were not up to the task, he faced the spectre of the ‘Africanisation’ of Cuba. This made the acquisition of the island more urgent. He redoubled his efforts to buy it but was roundly rebuffed by the Spanish government. His only option was war. Had it not been for the Kansas–Nebraska Act it is very likely that under firm presidential leadership the Democrats, North and South, would have united to support the conquest of the island. Their attitude, when Pierce entered the White House, was aptly captured by the Spanish minister in Washington: ‘1. We resolve that the Saints will inherit the Earth; 2. We resolve that we are the Saints.’¹¹⁹

A pretext for war could have been easily found. The *Black Warrior* incident could have served and others could have been manufactured – as Polk had done when he forced war on Mexico in 1846.

The rumblings of war in Europe appeared to offer an opportunity to the Pierce administration. The British, absorbed with the Crimean War, might have been reluctant to take on the United States, should it attack Cuba. In March 1854, John Crampton, the very able British minister in Washington, wrote to Clarendon,

There is, I fear, mischief brewing about Cuba. The European war will not pass over without the question ... of whether we are to see Cuba become part of the United States, or to determine to prevent it by force, will be brought up for our decision. As they say here, ‘we shall have to face the music’ on that point before long.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Primera Secretaría de Estado to Presidente del Consejo de Ministros, 9 April 1853, AHN, Estado, leg. 8048, exp. 2, no. 2.

¹¹⁹ Calderón de la Barca to Presidente del Consejo, 12 Feb. 1853, AHN, Ultramar, leg. 4645, exp. 25, no. 1.

¹²⁰ Crampton to Clarendon, 26 March 1854, Bodl, Clarendon Papers, c. 24.

But the music never came. The Pierce administration was caught in the maelstrom of the Kansas–Nebraska Act. That monument of southern folly crippled the president’s freedom of action at the very moment when the Crimean War seemed to offer an unprecedented opportunity to acquire Cuba. To gather the votes to pass the Kansas–Nebraska Act, Pierce had squandered his support in the North and inflamed the sectional divide. In the shadow of the Kansas–Nebraska Act, the acquisition of Cuba was seen as a sectional issue, not a national cause. Half a century would pass before the United States would have another chance to impose its will on the island. And when that opportunity came, in 1898, there would no longer be a British shield to protect Madrid’s rule over Cuba. Increasingly isolated in Europe and threatened by France and Russia, Britain had begun actively to court US goodwill. As Washington moved towards war with Spain the British – the government and the press – went out of their way to express their sympathy for their Transatlantic ‘cousins’. Britain’s quest for the ‘special relationship’ with the United States had begun; the price was US hegemony in Latin America.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Antes de 1898, el intento más sostenido estadounidense para adquirir Cuba se dio durante la presidencia de Franklin Pierce, cuando el debate sobre la esclavitud estaba empañando la política doméstica. España respondió a la amenaza con un cambio dramático en su política: con el fin de ganar la buena voluntad y protección de Inglaterra, ordenó la finalización del comercio de esclavos hacia Cuba. Este artículo analiza la estrategia de Pierce y examina el complejo posicionamiento que se generó entre Washington, Londres y Madrid. Rastreado en archivos norteamericanos, británicos y españoles, ésta es la primera historia internacional de la crisis que provocó la avaricia de Washington.

Spanish keywords: Franklin Pierce, Inglaterra, Pezuela, Cuba, Comercio de esclavos, filibusterismo

Portuguese abstract. Antes de 1898, a tentativa estadunidense mais sustentada de adquirir Cuba ocorreu durante o mandato de Franklin Pierce, quando o debate acerca da escravidão sacudia a política interna dos Estados Unidos. A Espanha reagiu contra a ameaça com uma mudança profunda de sua política: visando ganhar a proteção e favores britânicos, o país ordenou que o comércio de escravos para Cuba fosse encerrado. Este artigo analisa a estratégia de Pierce e examina a complexa competição que a questão causou entre Washington, Londres e Madrid. Garimpando arquivos estadunidenses, britânicos e espanhóis, o artigo é a primeira história internacional da crise provocada pela cobiça de Washington.

Portuguese keywords: Franklin Pierce, Grã-Bretanha, Pezuela, Cuba, tráfico de escravos, obstrução