

British Reaction to the Cuban Insurrection of 1868-1878

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THE BRITISH REACTION to the several attempts during the nineteenth century to expel the Spaniards from Cuba, the more important of their two remaining possessions in the New World, is for the most part well known and understood, but there are some exceptions which have received relatively little attention. One such episode is that of the Cuban insurrection of 1868-1878, to which Britain could not be indifferent, if only on account of her commercial interests. The insurrection, however, demanded British notice for other and more important reasons, since the Spaniards might find their position in Cuba untenable, either through the actions of the insurgents themselves, or through the intervention of the United States, a country which had for many years been deeply interested in the political future of Cuba. Britain, since the early part of the nineteenth century, had been prompted by the fear that the acquisition of Cuba by the United States would swing the balance of power in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico too decisively in favor of the latter. British efforts to counter the American threat culminated in 1852 in a proposal that the United States should join with Britain and France in a tripartite guarantee of the continued possession of Cuba by Spain. Washington refused to accept this self-denying ordinance, and so allay British fears.¹ This, however, was the last overt British attempt to safeguard Spanish rule in Cuba, though it was not until 1898 that the expulsion of the Spaniards from Cuba clearly demonstrated the change in the British conception of the place of Cuba in Anglo-American relations. Any study of British policy towards the Cuban question in this period must be conscious of this change, and it is the aim of this essay to show how far during the 1868-1878 insurrection Britain had moved from her attitude of 1852 towards that of 1898.

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¹ A. A. Ettinger, "The Proposed Anglo-Franco-American Treaty of 1852 to Guarantee Cuba to Spain," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th series, XIII (1930), 149-185.

The years 1856 to 1860 are normally regarded as the phase when Britain began to recognize that it was perhaps inexpedient to persist in her policy of rivalry with the United States in Central America. In the words of Dr. Mary Williams: "The British government had become convinced that that region, exploited by American enterprise, protected by a stable Anglo-Saxon government, would contribute much more to British commercial wealth than would be possible in a state of political independence attended by confusion and unrest which paralyzed all industrial development."² It is not certain that such an attitude extended to the remaining Spanish possessions of Cuba and Puerto Rico in the New World, although Sr. Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez is inclined to think that it did.³ Britain, it is true, gave no support to Spain in her resumption of sovereignty over the Dominican Republic in 1861, but it appears that the fear of the loss by Spain of Cuba and Puerto Rico, should Spain be involved in war with the United States, still weighed heavily with Britain. Lord John Russell, the foreign secretary, declared on May 14, 1861, that any Spanish complications with the United States which "might be in the end seriously injurious to her [Spanish] rule over ancient possessions would be viewed by Her Majesty's Government with lively apprehension and sincere regret."⁴ This declaration suggests that British jealousy of American influence in Cuba was persisting, whatever might be the changes in British policy upon the mainland of Central America. Nevertheless, the chief justification for Spanish rule in Cuba, namely the fear of American expansion, was weakening and as such could not fail to influence British policy in the long run. This soon became clear after Carlos Manuel de Céspedes had raised the standard of revolt at La Demajagua on October 10, 1868. The extent and success of this rising soon transformed it from a conflict which merely dislocated and injured British commerce to one which threatened the very existence of Spanish rule on the island and, most serious of all, seemed likely to embroil Spain with the United States.

Notwithstanding the efforts of the Cuban propagandist, Juan Manuel Macías, who was in England at this time, the cause of the Cuban insurgents aroused little sympathy or interest among the

² M. W. Williams, *Anglo-American Isthmian Diplomacy, 1815-1915* (Baltimore, 1916), p. 268.

³ Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, *En el camino de la independencia* (Habana, 1930), p. 70; Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, *La expansión territorial de los Estados Unidos* (Habana, 1935), pp. 284-288.

⁴ *Parliamentary Papers*, House of Commons series (hereinafter cited as H. C.), LXV (1861), 536-537, no. 11.

British public, save in so far as the Cuban revolt was forwarding the aims of the anti-slavery movement.⁵ Many had been the British warnings that the continuance of slavery in Cuba and Puerto Rico would deprive Spain of British support in the Caribbean, but in other respects the British government was largely untroubled by ideological considerations, and was free to concentrate upon practical questions. At first these centered upon injuries to British subjects and property in Cuba and the threat to shipping in the surrounding waters. The insurgents were receiving arms and other assistance by sea, while the Spaniards in their anxiety to intercept these filibusters were not always selective in their arrests of ships, often on the high seas. Since there had been no question of recognizing the rebels as belligerents, both Britain and the United States claimed that Spain had no right to interfere with their ships outside the territorial waters of Cuba. Such an interpretation of international law has not always been admitted, since a nation which had made such an arrest might be able to prove that it had been done in self-defence, but in practice Britain was little behind the emphatic refusal of the United States to acknowledge this claim.⁶

The situation became critical on March 29, 1868 when the captain general of Cuba, General Dulce, issued a decree declaring that all vessels captured in Spanish waters or on the high seas, and carrying men and arms to aid the Cuban rebels, would be treated as pirates and that their crews would be liable to execution. Lord Clarendon, the British foreign secretary, protested angrily against this "glaring violation" of the law of nations. The gravity of the situation was underlined by the approval of orders to British warships to recapture any British vessel thus seized, even if it had been convoyed into Spanish waters. The Foreign Office approved such orders with the utmost reluctance, but excused them by the need to meet extremes with extremes. Even the withdrawal of the decree afforded Clarendon little satisfaction since the "obnoxious principle" of seizure on

⁵ Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, ed., *Historia de la nación cubana* (Habana, 1952), V, 317-318; "The Cuban Insurrection," *The Edinburgh Review*, CXXXV-III (1873), 329-425.

⁶ A. Nevins, *Hamilton Fish. The Inner History of the Grant Administration* (New York, 1937), p. 187. See W. E. Hall, *A Treatise on International Law*, 8th edition, edited by A. Pearce Higgins (Oxford, 1924), pp. 328-330, and L. Oppenheim, *International Law. A Treatise*, 6th edition, edited by H. Lauterpacht (London, 1947), I, 268-269, for a discussion of this point of international law. Both incline to the view that the right of self-defence permitted the seizure of a ship on the high seas, although such an act would be in excess of "ordinary peace rights."

the high seas and the contemplated brutal punishments were not repudiated.⁷

The Foreign Office had been encouraged to take this firm stand by the seizure in British waters of the steamer, *Yarra*, after she had been abandoned by Cuban rebels, who had then sought refuge on the British possession of Great Stirrup Cay in the Bahamas. The Spaniards had landed armed men from a warship in pursuit of them, and in the course of their search several British houses were ransacked. Incidents of this type could not fail to alienate what little sympathy there was for the Spanish cause in Britain, and they seemed a poor reward for the efforts of Clarendon to prevent the sailing of filibusters from the British West Indies.⁸ Quite apart, however, from these injuries to British interests, Spanish rule in Cuba had little to commend it in normal circumstances. Slavery, of course, was viewed with the utmost distaste in Britain, and so was the extreme protectionist commercial policy of Spain. Even the prosperity of Cuba appeared to owe little to Spain, and it was believed, certainly in the United States, that the expulsion of the Spaniards would increase that prosperity. Once, therefore, as we have seen, Britain had come to doubt the wisdom and possibility of checking the expansion of the United States, the main basis of her interest in the retention of Cuba by Spain was removed. Mercantile considerations now dominated, so that it mattered less to Britain who ruled in Cuba than the manner in which they ruled, and how that rule had been secured. The safety of British commerce was the test, so that much as Britain might regret the persistence of the insurrection on the one hand, and lament the evils of Spanish rule on the other, she had no wish to purchase a settlement with the greater evil of a Spanish-American war which might easily increase and extend the dislocation of commerce in this region.

Many Englishmen doubtless recalled the disastrous effect of the Federal blockade upon the British cotton industry during the American civil war, while the recent Spanish war with four South American republics, Chile, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, had also injured British trade. A Spanish-American war bore a similar threat, nor was there

⁷ Clarendon to Sir J. Crampton (British minister in Madrid), no. 70, April 30, 1869; no. 75, May 4, 1869; no. 86, May 13, 1869, Public Record Office, London, Foreign Office Archives (cited hereinafter as F. O.), F. O. 185/499. Mr. Ffrench (British chargé d'affaires in Madrid) to Clarendon, no. 16, June 10, 1869, F. O. 72/1209. Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, pp. 187-188.

⁸ Clarendon to Lord Granville (secretary of state for colonies), private, November 24, 1869, Public Record Office, London, Granville Papers (cited hereinafter as G.D.), G.D. 29/55. Clarendon to Crampton, nos. 64-65, April 26, 1869; no. 67, April 27, 1869; no. 81, May 10, 1869, F.O. 185/499.

any prospect that it would be a speedy affair. As long as Spain enjoyed naval supremacy, the possession of Cuba provided her with a base of great strategic value, which might enable her to dominate the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, and blockade the southern ports of the United States. Captain A. T. Mahan was to declare some years later that of all the world's islands only Ireland could equal the strategic importance of Cuba.⁹ Nevertheless, the relative naval power of Spain and the United States was the decisive factor. Professor A. Nevins inclines to the view that the American fleet was the stronger, and he quite rightly emphasizes the lack of coal in Cuba and the frequent want of technical efficiency in the Spanish navy. On the other hand, Harold and Margaret Sprout give a striking picture of the decay of the American fleet at this time, and it is difficult to believe that the American monitors could have fought the six or seven armored frigates of Spain with much hope of success. Future naval development was to illustrate the limited value of the monitor. In other words, unless the Spaniards proved woefully incompetent, the war was likely to drag on until the greater ship-building capacity of the United States could redress the balance.¹⁰ Such a war of blockades and privateering could be viewed with nothing other than dismay in Great Britain.¹¹ This consideration in British policy has not always been appreciated by historians, who, in requests for American restraint, have seen only fears of American expansion in the Gulf of Mexico and sympathy for the Spanish cause. Thus Bécker argued that Spain did not finally forfeit British support until 1898, an error of some thirty years.¹²

⁹ A. T. Mahan, *The Interest of America in Sea-Power, Present and Future* (London, 1898), pp. 271-314; *Naval Strategy* (London, 1911), pp. 302-382.

¹⁰ Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power* (Princeton, 1944), pp. 165-175. Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, pp. 189-190, 618, 672. See also J. P. Baxter, 3rd, *The Ironclad Warship* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 304, who points out that the United States had no cruising ironclad fleet until a generation after the Civil War. A report of Colonel Jervis, enclosed in a letter of Cardwell (secretary of state for war) to Granville, private, November 8, 1869, G.D. 29/53, emphasized American naval weakness. See also *La Epoca* (conservative Spanish newspaper), December 1, 1873.

¹¹ E. Hammond (permanent under secretary in the Foreign Office) to Sir E. Thornton (British minister in Washington), private, September 17, 1869, Public Record Office, London, Hammond Papers (cited hereinafter as F.O. 391), F.O. 391/17. Until 1875 more trade passed between Britain and New Orleans than any other American port save New York, and amounted to approximately 15% of all Anglo-American trade. *Annual Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Statistics on the Commerce and Navigation of the United States*, 1871, 1872, 1874.

¹² Cf. J. M. Callahan, *Cuba and International Relations* (Baltimore, 1899), p. 411. J. Bécker y González, *España y Inglaterra* (Madrid, 1906), p. 119.

This British desire for peace was shared by many Americans, notably by the secretary of state, Hamilton Fish, who understood the many difficulties which would attend any intervention by the United States in Cuba. The apparent superiority of the Spanish fleet over that of America, together with the problems of emancipating some 300,000 slaves and of reuniting a divided country were powerful deterrents. In addition, the prevailing temper of his countrymen seemed opposed to the acquisition of Cuba. Was not the treaty to annex Santo Domingo rejected in the Senate in 1869? Westward expansion and railway development were absorbing the nation's energies. On the other hand, these solid objections to an adventurous foreign policy were being challenged by Cuban exiles and American sympathizers, who were exploiting the indignation in the United States against the savage treatment of suspected rebels and filibusters by the Spaniards. More than once Fish found himself hard put to resist the advocates of intervention to secure the liberation of Cuba or demands that the rebels should be recognized as belligerents, a step which would render war with Spain almost inevitable.¹³ A precarious balance thus existed in the United States between those favoring a course of inaction and those who pressed for a more positive policy. Some untoward incident might easily upset this balance and precipitate a war, just as British influence might fortify the resolve to remain inactive.

At first the party of action threatened to prevail, and in June, 1869, Fish, partly to mollify it, offered to mediate between the Spaniards and the insurgents. Fish had, furthermore, learned from the British minister, Sir Edward Thornton, that Britain would welcome an early conclusion to the warfare in Cuba and the removal of the threat of international complications. Fish proposed that the Spaniards should surrender the island to the rebels in return for an indemnity, that all slaves should be freed, and that there should be an amnesty for the rebels pending negotiations.¹⁴ The approach was a failure, since although there is evidence to suggest that the Spanish government might have contemplated the grant of autonomy

¹³ Thornton to Clarendon, no. 225 and 228, June 21, 1869, F.O. 5/1161; no. 74, February 21, 1870, F.O. 5/1191; Clarendon to Ffrench, no. 98, confidential, October 2, 1869, F.O. 185/500. Thornton to Granville (he became foreign secretary on July 6, 1870), no. 499, August 26, 1870, F.O. 5/1365. For estimates of Fish's foreign policy see S. F. Bemis, ed., *American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy* (New York, 1928), VII, 137ff., especially pp. 195-196; and Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, pp. 191-200, 231-248, 353-359.

¹⁴ Thornton to Clarendon, no. 207, secret, May 16, 1870; no. 235, secret, May 30, 1870, F.O. 5/1193. Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, pp. 191-200.

if not independence, national pride prevented any concessions until peace had been restored to the island. Fish was requested to withdraw his embarrassing proposals. An approach was also made to Clarendon during a visit which he paid to Paris in September, 1869. He commented, "I have seen Messrs. Olozaga, Prim and Silvela [the Spanish ambassador in Paris, the Spanish prime minister and foreign minister] who were all in trouble about the action that the United States are disposed to take respecting Cuba. They are prepared to recognize the independ^{ce} of the Colony w^h they know they cannot keep, but they wish us to ask the U. S. to give them time in order that it may be done with dignity and consideration for the national amour propre w^h will be deeply wounded."¹⁵ Clarendon, although ready to give the aid requested, was not disturbed by the Spaniards' confession of the weakness of their position in Cuba; and it is worthy of note that a few days before, on September 14, the London *Times* had unequivocally stated its attitude to the Cuban question. "The possession of Cuba can no longer have any other object for Spain than either the gratification of a silly pride, or subserviency to selfish considerations no longer in harmony with sound liberal principles. . . . It is to be hoped that they will carry their wisdom and consistency so far as to perceive that it is good for them to be rid of it on any terms."

The American offer of good offices was withdrawn, but the Spaniards made no progress in their efforts to subdue the rebels. General Prim made several attempts to negotiate directly with the insurgents without having recourse to foreign mediation, but to no avail, and in August, 1870, the Spanish minister of colonies approached Mr. A. H. Layard, the British minister in Madrid, with a proposal for Anglo-American mediation. This proposal, it appears, has escaped the attention of historians, and it is notable as the sole instance of agreement between Spain, Britain, and the United States to act together in quest of peace. The British were very reserved, but finally instructed Thornton to co-operate generally with Fish, and to extend British good offices to Spain.¹⁶ Such caution was superfluous, since the Spanish minister in Washington made no effort to co-operate with Fish and Thornton as the Spanish government had arranged. The whole episode was a fiasco; some explaining the

¹⁵ Clarendon to Gladstone (British prime minister), private, September 18, 1869, British Museum, London, Gladstone Papers (cited hereinafter as Gladstone), Add. MSS., 44134. Cf. Callahan, pp. 376-388; Guerra y Sánchez, *Historia de la Nación Cubana*, V, 276-294; Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, pp. 301-303.

¹⁶ Layard to Granville, no. 62, August 4, 1870, F.O. 72/1307. Cf. Guerra y Sánchez, *Historia de la nación cubana*, V, 300-310.

Spanish minister's conduct by pointing to the interest of his brother, a war contractor in Cuba, in the continuance of the insurrection, others by pronouncing him too preoccupied with a love affair in New York to concern himself with diplomacy. The cause might even be found at Madrid, despite its initiative in the matter, as Prim's true feelings in this question have by no means been established. All that can be said is that Prim alone of Spanish politicians seemed likely to brave the displeasure of his countrymen by making concessions to the Cubans. His assassination in December, 1870, removed even this slender hope.¹⁷ With the failure of mediation, Britain concentrated upon the defence of her interests and the reduction of tension in the relations of Spain and the United States.

At this point the question of slavery in Puerto Rico becomes of great importance, since abolition here, when disorder in Cuba was making it impossible there, might be taken as an earnest of future Spanish concessions and reform, and might be calculated to ease Spanish-American relations. The British government had also to consider the anti-slavery agitation in England, to which some reference has already been made. At first, the government had lent little support to the demands for emancipation in the Spanish colonies, but after successive Spanish ministries, despite profuse promises, had taken no concrete steps, the British government felt obliged to pursue a more active course. On January 23, 1872, "a numerous and influential deputation" called upon Lord Granville to press for more positive action, and only ten days before Granville had lamented to Layard: "I wish we could persuade or bully them [the Spaniards] into doing something on the slavery question." Gladstone's fears lest Britain should be guilty of unwarrantable interference in the affairs of another state were being overcome, especially when it appeared that the Spanish government was acting against the wishes of the Puerto Ricans themselves. Gradually the British government felt the need to adopt a stronger policy.¹⁸

¹⁷ Unpublished memoirs of Sir A. H. Layard, British Museum, London (cited hereinafter as Layard, *Memoirs*), II, 105ff., Add. MSS., 38932. Thornton to Hammond, private, November 1, 1870; November 15, 1870; December 13, 1870, F.O. 391/17. Guerra y Sánchez, *Guerra de los Diez Años, 1868-1878* (La Habana, 1950), I, 384. In a footnote Guerra y Sánchez briefly discusses Prim's attitude, and decides against his readiness to grant Cuban independence.

¹⁸ Granville to Layard, slave trade no. 3, February 1, 1872, H.C., LXI (1873), 627; private, January 13, 1872, G.D. 29/116. Gladstone to Granville, private and secret, November 15, 1871, G.D. 29/60. See also Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, CCVIII, 768; CCX, 1550-1573. H.C., LIV (1872), 725-764; LXI (1873), 627-673. Granville to Layard, slave trade no. 21, October 9, 1871, F.O. 84/1340. A useful impression of the views of the anti-slavery agitation in Britain can be gained from the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*.

Chronic ministerial instability in Spain prevented any progress until June, 1872, when a radical ministry led by Ruiz Zorrilla came into office, and survived until February, 1873. This ministerial change, however, also effected an ephemeral improvement in Spanish-American relations, which, although normally highly desirable from the British point of view, was not an unmixed blessing upon this occasion owing to the anti-slavery agitation in England.¹⁹ This removal of the American threat was reflected in the King of Spain's speech to the Cortes of October 3, 1872, which merely implied that reforms might soon be undertaken in Puerto Rico.²⁰ The breathing-space afforded the Spaniards was soon over, and as early as October 20 the Spaniards were finding it necessary to assure General Sickles, the American minister, that the slaves in Puerto Rico would be freed, though as yet they were undecided whether emancipation should be immediate or of a more gradual nature.

The reaction of the governments of Britain and the United States quickly resolved that doubt, since Fish had it noised abroad that he was planning a discriminatory tariff against the exports of slave-owning states, while every effort by Spain to enlist the sympathy of Britain encountered the unbending reply of Layard that immediate abolition alone would meet with British approval and perhaps assure Spain of some consideration in a dispute with Washington. Somewhat irrelevantly, and possibly because it was the only threat he felt he could safely deliver at a time when threats might be useful, Layard warned Martos, the minister of state, that if the slave trade revived Britain might not content herself with a preventive squadron off the coast of Africa.²¹ The frequent visits of Martos to the British legation at the end of November and the beginning of December were of no avail, and the joint pressure of Britain and the United States forced a reluctant ministry to introduce a bill for the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico.

¹⁹ Layard to Granville, no. 212, confidential, June 20, 1872; no. 242, secret, June 24, 1872, F.O. 72/1311.

²⁰ Layard to Granville, slave trade no. 25, October 4, 1872, H.C., LXI (1873), 643-644. See *Ibid.*, pp. 645-646, for Layard's complaint that Zorrilla's speech of October 12, 1872 "scarcely even contained the vague promises to which we have unfortunately been too long accustomed."

²¹ Fish to Sickles, no 270, October 29, 1872, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (cited hereinafter as *Foreign Relations*), December, 1872, p. 580, no. 432. Layard to Granville, slave trade no. 39, most confidential, November 30, 1872, H.C., LXI (1873), 651; most confidential, telegram, November 29, 1872; telegrams of November 30 and December 1, 1872, F.O. 72/1313; private, November 30, 1872 and December 1, 1872, G.D. 29/100. Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, pp. 621-637.

Menacing as was the international scene, that within Spain was soon little better. No ministry would willingly have initiated such controversial legislation had it not faced the graver danger that the United States might abandon her strict neutrality, while Britain displayed a complete lack of sympathy. The slavery party launched a great movement of protest in December, 1872, to which rallied many of those who had previously professed themselves supporters of emancipation. Almost the whole of the press was bought, and Layard feared that the conservatives might attempt to overthrow the government by a military revolt. "A National League for the Defence of the Integrity of the Territory" of Spain was formed, and the opposition played on the fear that reforms might mean the loss of Cuba. Nevertheless, despite the resignation of two ministers, Zorrilla retained his majority in the Cortes until the fall of the Spanish monarchy and the establishment of a republic in February, 1873. The emancipation of the Puerto Rican slaves did not finally become law until March 23.²² It is possible that the crisis over emancipation had contributed to this revolution, the importance of which is underlined by Professor Nevins, who declares that the establishment of a republic in Spain did more than anything to save Spain and the United States from a rupture in the winter of 1872-1873.²³ In any case, it may be claimed that the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico was of major importance in Spanish-American relations at this time, since, although its contribution to the overthrow of the monarchy may be somewhat hypothetical, it clearly removed one cause of American complaint, and, by rendering the continuance of slavery in Cuba an anomaly, hastened the extension of abolition to that island once peace had been restored. British diplomacy had done not a little to make possible these beneficial results.

As in the summer of 1872, this latest improvement in the rela-

²² Layard to Granville, no. 408, secret, December 30, 1872, F.O. 72/1313; slave trade no. 49, December 11, 1872, F.O. 84/1353, and H.C., LXI (1873), 655. *El Abolicionista*, December 20, 1872, p. 50, reported a delegation of 53 Madrid newspaper editors presenting a protest to the president of the council against emancipation on December 14, 1872. See also I. A. Bermejo, *Historia de la interinidad y guerra civil de España desde 1868* (Madrid, 1875-1877), II, 874ff. Bermejo was puzzled by the abrupt change in policy over emancipation by the government. Apart from domestic political reasons, he lays great emphasis on foreign pressure, notably by the United States, but also by Britain. Bermejo, *Historia de la interinidad y guerra civil de España desde 1868*, II, 867-870.

²³ Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, pp. 635-637. Layard, *Memoirs*, II, 342-344, Add. MSS., 38932. The creation of a Spanish republic aroused a brotherly feeling in the United States, thus easing tension.

tions of Spain and the United States was to be of brief duration, so that when the infamous *Virginus* executions took place, the risk of war appeared very real. The *Virginus*, a steamer flying the American flag, but, as it proved later, actually in the service of the Cuban insurgents, was captured off Jamaica by the Spanish cruiser, *Tornado*. This was a serious, if not a great, crime but a few days later no less than 53 of the passengers and crew were executed, the Spanish government telegraphing too late to save the unfortunate victims. A number of those executed were British and American subjects. The supposed insult to the American flag, together with the executions, raised a storm of protest in the United States. On November 15, 1873, Madrid was warned that unless redress was forthcoming by November 26, the United States would intervene in Cuba to find the necessary compensation. The American assurance that they held the Spanish party in Cuba responsible rather than Madrid, and would take action accordingly, was unlikely to reassure the Spaniards, since they would hardly tolerate American intervention in Cuba without taking action themselves. For several days informed opinion in the United States expected war to follow the reunion of Congress on December 1.²⁴ Thornton commented to Granville, "The two countries have long been on the eve of a rupture, and the affair of the *Virginus* is but the additional hair which seems likely to break the camel's back."²⁵

The first British act in the crisis was the arrival of H.M.S. *Niobe* at Santiago after the executions had taken place, but her presence made certain that there would be no further loss of life. The next steps were diplomatic. Although the execution of sixteen British subjects gave Britain a direct interest in the episode, this was subordinated to the prior concern "by all possible means to avoid the greater evil of a war between the United States and Spain. . . ."²⁶ This formed the core of Granville's instructions to Layard. In Washington Thornton was seeing Fish constantly, not only gaining information about the latter's view of a satisfactory solution, but

²⁴ There are many accounts by American historians of the *Virginus* crisis; the best is probably that of Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, pp. 668ff. He speaks of the episode producing a "pitch of righteous anger" Americans had not felt since Fort Sumter.

²⁵ Thornton to Granville, private, November 18, 1873, G.D. 29/80; nos. 455-456, confidential, recorders of cypher telegrams, November 16, 1873, F.O. 5/1435. Thornton wrote: "Here all is excitement; men of war are rapidly being prepared and forts put in order."

²⁶ Granville to Layard, private, November 27, 1873, British Museum, London, Layard Papers (cited hereinafter as Layard), Add. MSS., 39004. Nevins, p. 670.

also encouraging Fish's desire to compromise. Layard commented: "Your intervention at Washington has been of the greatest use, especially as it appears to have led Mr. Fish to restrain General Sickles who seemed determined that a rupture should take place."²⁷ Nevertheless, on November 25 Sickles was ordered to leave on the morrow unless he received a satisfactory reply to the demands of the United States, a move which showed that in Washington at least British diplomacy could hope to achieve little.²⁸

In November, 1873, Spain was probably less able to fight the United States than at any other time between 1868 and 1878. Civil war was raging in Catalonia, Navarre and the Basque provinces. At Cartagena three of Spain's finest frigates were held by rebels. Although two others, recently in the service of these insurgents, had been seized by British and German warships, and ultimately handed over to the government of Castelar, the Spanish fleet as a whole was inadequately manned and poorly led. Thus the naval superiority of the Spaniards over the Americans was largely, if not entirely, cancelled out. Yet the excitement in the press of Madrid was threatening to drive the unfortunate country into a further conflict, unless the government was resolved to compromise and to ignore the bellicose language of such papers as *La Bandera Española*.

The Spanish government would be an unworthy government if it will not defend, without recognizing or accepting any limitation and without omitting any sacrifices, the integrity of our territory, and our honor, and our independence as a nation, if another nation or all nations joined together to impair them in the least.²⁹

Although the more responsible Spanish politicians were less anxious to make party capital out of the crisis than they had been in December, 1872, when slavery in Puerto Rico had been the issue, there appeared a real danger that concessions by the ministry of Castelar would result in its overthrow and the succession of a less moderate group. Layard appreciated that he should first strive to calm passions at Madrid, and he was assisted in this task by his cordial relations with most of the leading Spanish politicians of the time, notably Castelar himself, and with Marshal Serrano, the most influential of the more conservative politicians. Therefore on November 18 Layard urged Castelar to use government influence to restrain

²⁷ Layard to Granville, private, November 22, 1873, G.D. 29/25-26.

²⁸ *Foreign Relations*, December, 1874, p. 958, no. 646.

²⁹ *La Bandera Española*, November 18, 1873.

the press, which was exciting public opinion to a dangerous degree. The following day he saw Serrano and begged him to rally the conservative elements in support of a policy of compromise by Castelar.³⁰ Layard's efforts were greatly appreciated by Castelar, and four years later he was to praise and thank Layard for those counsels which "contributed in the first degree to save Spain from an unfortunate war in the tremendous complication provoked by the *Virginius*."³¹ Certainly Castelar had reason to be grateful for his advice, since his conduct was so different from that of his American colleague, General Sickles. J. Ford Rhodes has accused Sickles of telegraphing such news as would make for war, and of mailing that which would make for peace.³² The published telegrams and despatches of Sickles reinforce this conclusion, so that although it must be admitted that prejudice lay behind many of Layard's criticisms of the American minister, not all were groundless.³³

Indeed, the crisis in the relations of Spain and the United States had been intensified by the nature of the correspondence between Sickles and Carvajal, the Spanish minister of state. The language of their notes had been scarcely diplomatic, and if Carvajal was primarily responsible, Sickles had been only too happy to employ similar language. Carvajal was not well-fitted for his responsible post, especially in such a crisis, and it has been said that he penned some of the drafts of his despatches in the *Café Fornos*, where, to the delight of his admirers, he read aloud the more striking passages from his diplomatic correspondence. Professor Nevins justly remarks, "In fact, Fish and Poló [Poló de Bernabé, the able Spanish minister in Washington] were as likely to find a peaceable solution as the nervous Carvajal and testy Sickles were likely to cause a rupture."³⁴ The decision of Fish and Castelar to conduct the most important negotiations by way of the Spanish legation in Washington was consequently a valuable step towards preserving the peace, and it is possible that Castelar's decision of November 18 to adopt this course

³⁰ Layard to Granville, no. 540, most confidential, November 20, 1873; no. 565, confidential, November 25, 1873, F.O. 72/1343; private, November 22, 1873, Layard, Add. MSS., 39124; private, November 22, 1873, G.D. 29/25-26.

³¹ Castelar to Layard, private, January 13, 1878, Layard, Add. MSS., 39017.

³² J. F. Rhodes, *History of the United States, 1850-1877* (New York and London, 1920), VII, 29-36.

³³ *Foreign Relations*, December, 1874, pp. 939-977, nos. 614-688. Layard, *Memoirs*, II, 326ff., Add. MSS., 38932.

³⁴ Layard, *Memoirs*, III, 57ff., Add. MSS., 38933. Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, p. 678.

was influenced by the recommendations of Layard, who was greatly disturbed by the behavior of both Carvajal and Sickles.³⁵

Layard's most important contribution, however, was to dispel the dangerous Spanish illusion that Britain feared the annexation of Cuba by the United States. From the outset, Layard was impressing upon Castelar that Spain would receive no help from Britain in the event of war with the United States. Britain condemned the *Virginius* executions, and was merely waiting until the greater difficulty with the United States had been resolved before pressing her own demands for redress.³⁶ That a satisfactory solution was finally reached by Spain and the United States was due mainly to the readiness of those in office, both in Washington and Madrid, to preserve the peace, but the British moderating counsels have their place, as Castelar himself acknowledged. Layard also received the warm thanks of Lord Granville for his contribution to a peaceful settlement.³⁷ It has been argued that fear of American expansion provided "obvious reasons" for this British desire for peace, but there is no evidence in the Foreign Office archives or in the private papers of British diplomats and statesmen to support this view. On the contrary, Clarendon had already implicitly recognized, apparently without regret, that the Spanish position in Cuba was precarious, and in March, 1875, Lord Derby, the foreign secretary of Disraeli's second ministry, was to comment to Layard that ostensibly the Americans did not want Cuba since they could have it if they cared to move.³⁸ On the whole, it appears that the British government was more fearful of war between Spain and the United States, with its dislocation of trade, than of the political consequences of such a war.

An indirect result of the *Virginius* episode was the resignation of the disappointed Sickles, to be succeeded by Caleb Cushing, a shrewder diplomat, and one who was more kindly disposed towards Spain. He worked conscientiously for a settlement of outstanding differences. Crises continued, but Cushing appreciated that as the civil war in Spain, which had been raging since 1873, was brought

³⁵ Layard to Granville, private, November 19, 1873; November 20, 1873, G.D. 29/101; private, November 22, 1873, G.D. 29/25-26.

³⁶ Idem.

³⁷ Granville to Layard, private, November 27, 1873, Layard, Add. MSS., 39004. Cf. Lord Tenterden (permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs) to Layard, private, December 8, 1873, Layard, Add. MSS., 39135. Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, pp. 667-694.

³⁸ Callahan, *Cuba and International Relations*, pp. 411, 441. Derby to Layard, private, March 13, 1875, Layard, Add. MSS., 39007.

to a close, so the ability of Spain to restore order in Cuba would increase, and with it the desire so to do. Whereas in November, 1873, *La Epoca* had described Spain as a prostrated state, preserving merely the name of a nation, by 1875 Spanish self-confidence was returning, and Cushing remarked on November 26, 1875, that "many of the most thoughtful men in Spain really long for a foreign war as the only sufficient remedy for the domestic dissensions that now distract the country."³⁹ In November, 1873, even that luxury had seemed beyond Spain.

The usual autumnal deterioration in Spanish-American relations set in at the end of 1875. Fish was becoming impatient with the failure of Spain either to pacify or reform Cuba, while American subjects and property continued to suffer from the conflict. On November 6, the Spaniards, sensing an impending crisis, requested British good offices with the United States, but Derby saw the request only as an opportunity to express his true feelings concerning the state of Anglo-Spanish relations, and bluntly told the Spanish minister that ". . . an amount of ill-will against Spain was created throughout the country among very influential classes which the Spanish Government, I am sure, could not wish to arouse, and which in many ways did much more damage to Spanish interests than the petty gains or fines could possibly compensate for."⁴⁰ Obviously Spain could expect little sympathy from that quarter, and this blunt statement perhaps contributed to the Spanish decision to anticipate possible American demands with a note dated November 15 promising redress on many outstanding issues. Meanwhile, Fish had already despatched a note to Cushing, the well known No. 266 of November 5, 1875, in which all American complaints against Spain were listed, and in which the possibility of extreme measures was implied.⁴¹ The note aimed not only at the protection of American interests in Cuba, but also at an early peace, with the grant of autonomy or independence to Cuba. Copies of No. 266 were sent to all European capitals, and their support was solicited to impress upon Spain the need for reforms and peace.

Fish appears to have hoped particularly for British support. Callahan observes that "it was a bold step to invite the co-operation

³⁹ Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, pp. 692-694. F. E. Chadwick, *The Relations of the United States and Spain* (New York, 1911), p. 376. These domestic dissensions persisted from 1873 until the early part of 1876.

⁴⁰ Derby to Layard, no. 318, November 6, 1875, F.O. 185/570.

⁴¹ Layard to Derby, no. 665, November 17, 1875, F.O. 72/1412. Chadwick, *The Relations of the United States and Spain*, p. 375. Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, pp. 874-886.

of England; it opened a wide perspective; it looked like breaking the last barrier of distrust between two branches of the Anglo-Saxon race.’⁴² Cushing viewed the invitation to Britain in a realistic light:

If Great Britain co-operates, Spain will succumb in sullen despair to whatever the two governments may jointly dictate; but if Great Britain refuses to co-operate, Spain will assume she has the sympathy of all European powers, more especially as she thinks she has now gone, by her note of the 15th, to the ultimate point in each of the particular griefs of the United States. In other words, there will be war.⁴³

It quickly emerged that no European power, except perhaps Russia, and certainly not Britain, was prepared to support the demands of the United States. Although Derby remarked that distance lessened the emotional impact and the ill-effects of the revolt upon Britain, the British refusal implied no sympathy for Spain or desire to thwart the United States.⁴⁴ Greater events elsewhere were repeatedly overshadowing Cuban affairs. The London *Times* and *Daily News* both sent special correspondents to Cuba, but no Cochrane or Byron was attracted by the struggle, and apart from the slavery question, Cuban affairs caused no great stir. As the *Times* remarked, Britain could not play knight-errant on behalf of all down-trodden communities. Finally on January 27, 1876, Derby informed the American minister that any foreign pressure on Spain would constitute an unjust interference in the domestic politics of an independent state.⁴⁵ Can this reply be interpreted as one of sympathy for Spain? It seems doubtful, and is more likely to have been prompted by the British desire not to become entangled in the Cuban question.

The British reply persuaded the United States that unless they were prepared to go to war, the only practical policy was that of compromise on the basis of the Spanish note of November 15, 1875. Spanish-American relations did, in fact, improve during 1876, although only half of the American objectives were achieved. Spain might make concessions to American interests in Cuba, but questions of autonomy, independence and the abolition of slavery were all neatly side-stepped.⁴⁶ Fish had, perforce, to be content with a half solution, while the Spaniards, freed after January, 1876, from dis-

⁴² Callahan, *Cuba and International Relations*, pp. 421-424, 430-434.

⁴³ Chadwick, *The Relations of the United States and Spain*, p. 375.

⁴⁴ Derby to Thornton, no. 246, December 3, 1875, F.O. 115/588.

⁴⁵ The London *Times*, January 24, 1876. Derby to Layard, no. 34, February 1, 1876, F.O. 185/578.

⁴⁶ Nevins, *Hamilton Fish*, p. 885.

tractions of civil war at home, were able to redouble their efforts in Cuba. By the Peace of Zanjón in February, 1878, the insurrection was brought to a close, and complete Spanish control over the island was reasserted.

To some extent, therefore, it may be claimed that British policy had contributed to this postponement of a solution of the Cuban question until 1898. The reluctance of Fish to embark upon an aggressive policy to settle the Cuban issue was reinforced by the knowledge that he could expect no help from Britain. But at the same time, it is clear that Britain had made some progress towards the attitude adopted during the Spanish-American war of 1898. The precarious Spanish hold upon Cuba was recognized, but Britain was not prepared to seek a solution save at the express invitation of both Spain and the United States. British policy was concentrated upon more immediate and practical ends; notably the defence of British shipping and commercial interests, and support of moves likely to reduce the danger of a Spanish-American war. The political future of Cuba was of less interest to Great Britain than the manner in which that future was determined.