

Remember the Virginius: New Orleans and Cuba in 1873

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The United States was keenly interested in Cuba almost from this country's inception, and particularly after we acquired Florida. In 1823 John Quincy Adams described a law of political gravity whereby just as the apple must fall eventually to the ground, Cuba would one day fall to the United States.

New Orleans not only endorsed this sentiment but its history and location made it more aware of Cuba than any other American city. Thus in 1850 Narciso Lopez, after failing to raise an expedition elsewhere in the United States, succeeded in New Orleans. Aided by General John Quitman, governor of Mississippi, and others, Lopez raised a group of 750 men to invade Cuba. The expedition failed but got safely back to Key West.

The next year (1851) Lopez raised another expedition in New Orleans with Colonel W. L. Crittenden as his second in command. They were caught in Cuba and fifty-one were executed, including Crittenden. In furious retaliation, rioters in New Orleans attacked the Spanish consulate and any other Spanish property they could find.

Three years later the Ostend Manifesto endorsed the feelings of New Orleanians when it said that if Spain refused to sell Cuba then we would "be justified in wresting it from

Spain if we possess the power." But when Cuban insurrection broke out in 1868, New Orleans seemingly had too many troubles of its own to pay much attention to the fighting in Cuba.¹

By the fall of 1873 the Cuban revolt was five years old and Louisiana was in some respects slowly resuming life as usual. Hall's Vegatable [*sic*] Sicilian Hair Renewer was available to restore hair "except in extreme old age," and Buckingham's Dye for the Whiskers was offered for the "faded whiskers" of fading gentlemen. To complement these spiritual ministrations, a man could select from such time-tested physical aids as New-foundland Bitters, Ayer's Ague Cure, Cherry Pectoral and others. For entertainment "Bertha the Sewing Machine Girl" played nightly to a full house. As an added attraction, a free sewing machine was given to the holder of the lucky ticket at each performance.²

But in other and more vital aspects, Louisiana was far from "normalcy." Appomattox was only eight years behind, and although some Southern states had rid themselves of their radical governments, Louisiana had not. She was enmeshed in conflict and bitterness. She even had two governors claiming legitimacy. The situation was tense—some killings had just taken place in Grant Parish—and the journals of both political persuasions were deeply obsessed with the bitter aftermath of war. Occasionally the growing financial crisis intruded, calling

¹ For general background the following books are useful:

Callahan, James M., *Cuba and International Relations* (Baltimore, 1899).

Chadwick, French E., *The Relations of the United States and Spain* (New York, 1909).

Jenks, Leland H., *Our Cuban Colony* (New York, 1928).

Nevins, Allan, *Hamilton Fish* (New York, 1937).

Perkins, Dexter, *The Monroe Doctrine, 1867-1907* (Baltimore, 1937).

For the purposes of this study the New Orleans *Picayune*, *Price Current*, and *Republican*, for the months of October and November in 1873 were thoroughly examined. The other New Orleans newspapers were consulted for corroboration, but with one exception all of the citations are from the *Picayune* or the *Republican* since the first was Democratic and the second Republican, and the opposite polarity of these two best demonstrates the unity that existed. All citations are from the year 1873.

² *Picayune*, Oct. 30, Nov. 13, Nov.-Dec. *passim*.

forth comment, as did the revolution then going on in Cuba. But claims of fraud and charges of favoritism, complaints of military coercion and accusations of Bourbonism were the overwhelming considerations.³

As November 1873 made its appearance, resolutions were passed "expressive of the people's undiminished hostility to the government of Kellogg and his co-conspirators against the liberties of Louisiana and declaring the submission of the people was only due to the intervention of Federal Arms." In this contest "between ignorant and brutal centralization on the one side, and enlightened self-government on the other," it did not seem possible that the opposite sides could ever agree. But the same newspaper that gave the above analysis of the issue carried a small item from Havana: "The steamer *Virginius* was captured with all on board, by the Spanish gunboat *Tornado*, near Jamaica, on the 31st ult. She had 170 passengers and crew, who, with the vessel and Cargo, have been brought to Santiago de Cuba. Proceedings will be immediately commenced against these prisoners."⁴

The *Virginius*, an ex-Confederate blockade runner, had been carrying men and arms to the Cuban rebels for some time past. Since neither Spain nor the United States recognized the insurgents in Cuba as belligerents, they could not fit out vessels of their own for this purpose. Instead, the rebels registered what vessels they could by subterfuge with some neutral nation. The *Virginius* had been registered as an American vessel out of New York, but in reality it was owned by the Cuban Junta. On October 23, 1873, under the command of Captain Fry, the *Virginius* left Kingston, Jamaica, to carry men, supplies, and one General Ryan to Cuba. She was flying the American flag when overhauled by the *Tornado* near Jamaica. Within a few days General Ryan, Captain Fry and others were summarily executed by the Spanish General Burriel. Captain Fry and some of the others thus killed were American citizens.⁵

³ *Picayune*, Sept.-Nov. 5, *passim*; *Republican*, Sept.-Nov. 5, *passim*.

⁴ *Picayune*, Nov. 6, 7.

⁵ *Picayune*, Nov. 9.

On Friday, November 7, the *Picayune* reported in circum-spect fashion that little was known of the circumstances surrounding the capture, and therefore the case of the United States was not yet defined. Readers were reminded that the vessel had been protected in several foreign ports during the past two years on the grounds that her papers as an American steamer were in perfect and legal order. The next day a small, prim editorial suggested that the loss was a serious one to the Cubans and that there might be a diplomatic question touching the capture in English waters. But most editorial efforts that day were spent in pillorying the Radical Republicans, Governor William Kellogg and Senator-elect P.B.S. Pinchback.⁶

One newspaper, the *Republican*, unable of course to join in baiting Republicans, pointed up the news from Cuba. That same Saturday an editorial report of the first executions demanded strict accountability of the Spanish and immediate recognition of belligerency for the Cuban insurgents. And again on Sunday, while the *Picayune* was still soliciting support for a petition to Congress which would show "that we have not acquiesced, have not become reconciled to the satrapy which Durell and Grant have placed over us," the *Republican* urged all lovers of liberty to attend a "Free Cuba" meeting to be held that day. It frankly admitted its own special interest. "The colored citizens are especially solicitous that the Government should, as soon as legally possible, root up a pestilent plant whose seeds may be blown in any direction and quarantine freedom against any possible infection of bondage."⁷

At the meeting which was attended by many "men of color," Pinchback noted with regret the marked absence of Democrats and Fusionists. He reminded the absent ones of their former zealously in the cause of Cuba, of Quitman, Crittenden, Fannin and Crockett, of their own recent struggle for independence, and he wondered if their present indifference was because they no longer had an interest in acquiring slave territory. Pinchback was mistaken. The absent Democrats, as they

⁶ *Picayune*, Nov. 7, 8.

⁷ *Republican*, Nov. 8, 9; *Picayune*, Nov. 9.

were soon to evince, were neither indifferent nor were they no longer interested in acquiring Cuba.⁸

As reports of naval movements and public indignation began to crowd out other news, both political factions paid increasing attention to the possibility of war. When the news came from Santiago that Captain Fry and his crew had been put to death, cries for war began to mount. Calling the execution of the "gallant" Captain Fry and the others a brutal massacre, the *Picayune* called for "instant and ample reparation for this fearful outrage." The people, it said, were ready to sustain President Grant "in the severest retaliative measures."⁹

By the fifteenth of November, when the news was nine days old, the pot was boiling. Throughout the ensuing month, war with Spain in Cuba was the chief topic of interest and, it seemed, the chief hope of New Orleans. The war news and related topics frequently occupied over half of the available news and editorial space. As November neared its close, the *Picayune* announced, somewhat gleefully, "It would be useless to deny that all the signs of the hour point to a war with Spain," while the *Republican* warned its own national administration that the demands for "reparation and guarantees from Spain for the Cuban outrages should not be lightly regarded by the government, or its true friends and supporters. . . . [This] is not a 'popular clamour' which will 'soon blow over.'"¹⁰

If there was war fever in New Orleans, the newspapers did nothing to cool it. Rather they played every stop on the organ of propaganda, ranging from legal and lofty reasons for intervention to atrocity charges, appeals to tradition, commercial advantages, and manifest destiny.

Thus the Gulf of Mexico was the 'highroad to nations' and the Spanish had no right to molest any vessel whatsoever unless it was within a marine league of Cuba. Even though the *Virginus* "may have been plying in the interests of the Cuban

⁸ *Republican*, Nov. 11.

⁹ *Republican*, Nov. 13; *Picayune*, Nov. 14.

¹⁰ *Picayune*, Nov.-Dec., *passim*, Nov. 29; *Republican*, Nov.-Dec. *passim*, Nov. 27.

insurgents . . . every citizen of the United States upon board of her was as much entitled to the protection of his government as though he stood in the streets of New York." Moreover, the slaughter of the crew called for intervention "wholly in the interests of civilized humanity."¹¹

When some doubts about embarrassing the struggling republican government in Spain arose, the journal of the New Orleans Republicans answered, "It is precisely to protect the cause of republicanism from this reproach that the government of the United States should take military occupation of Cuba. Such an act on the part of our government may save the republican cause in Spain. Sympathy for Spain consists in the military occupation of Cuba. Let it be done, and at once." Readers were told that after all the Captain-General in Cuba was only a figurehead. The real "King of Cuba," was one Don Julian de Lulueta. He led the Peninsulares who flourished by slavery and regarded Cuba as a money-making place only. "They make no secret of their intention of waging a war to the knife should circumstances render it desirable, nor do they hesitate to avow their conviction that they are strong enough to exterminate the Creoles and blacks." These Peninsulares were waging a war in which "slaveholders are in arms against abolitionists, and an established priesthood opposes heretical freedom of religion."¹²

Perhaps the loftiest appeal was the one for emancipation. Captain Fry and General Ryan had given up their lives that thereby "the last enslaved race on the continent should be hurled by the sturdy blows of warfare into the estate of personal freedom." The United States had a clear mandate "to stop a brutal and savage war, . . . and expand the principle of emancipation to the ends of the earth."¹³

But just freeing the slaves would not be enough. The island must be made safe for them. Considering the status of the freedman in our own "superior civilization and humanity," the

¹¹ *Picayune*, Nov. 12, 14, 13.

¹² *Republican*, Nov. 25, Dec. 10, Nov. 27.

¹³ *Republican*, Nov. 22, Nov. 12.

Republican shuddered to apprehend the fate of the emancipated slave among a people "so bloodthirsty and so ungovernable."¹⁴

"Bloodthirsty" was the word for the Spaniard. Credulous readers were given the history of his barbarities from the expulsion of the Moors, through Cortez to the present. Even the ancient Romans and Vandals had been appalled by the Spanish. This was the land of the Inquisition whose black legend of colonizing activities in the new world had been related by Bartolomé de las Casas.¹⁵

Now clucking matrons and angered men read daily of Cuban officials driving women and children to the woods, then hunting them with bloodhounds. The imagination and chivalry of young blades were stimulated by tales of beautiful Creole girls being tortured and flogged by brutal soldiers. While acknowledging the need for vigilance against exaggerations and untruths, the *Picayune* gave its readers a gory account of "Burriel's Butchers," describing a Spanish "Slaughter Pen" and telling how "a baby girl scarcely four years old was forced to kneel with the rest and shot." Such cruelties were solemnly deplored as "frightful and unparalleled." Hardly a day went by without some illustration of the Spanish character. Young Americans were killed in Havana; a doctor was imprisoned for selling medicine to wounded patriots; and that pig, Burriel, was insolent to the American Consul. A witness described how twenty of the captured men embraced the Catholic faith on condition that their lives would be spared, only to be treacherously deceived at the last and killed anyway. (They might better have followed the course of Hathir Cacica, a Peruvian Indian. Cacica, went the story, had been condemned to death by the Spaniards. "He was persuaded by a Franciscan friar to turn Christian, and then he would go to Heaven. Cacica asked whether there were any Spaniards in Heaven. 'Yes,' said the friar, 'it is full of them.' 'Stay, then,' said the Indian, 'I would rather go to hell than have any more of their company.'")¹⁶

What was perhaps the bloodiest tale described the execu-

¹⁴ *Republican*, Nov. 19.

¹⁵ *Picayune*, Dec. 14; *Republican*, Dec. 14.

¹⁶ *Republican*, Dec. 20; *Picayune*, Dec. 7, Nov. 27, Nov. 21, Nov. 16, Nov. 26; *Republican*, Nov. 28, Dec. 14.

tions. The climax came when the victims' heads were severed and paraded on pikes through Santiago. Revolting as that was, succeeding accounts reported the massacre to be "more horrible and hideous than has yet been told." The victims, it seems, were hard to kill, remaining stubbornly alive while the clumsy executioners poured in volley after volley with the muzzles of their guns almost touching their pitiful targets. Apparently the Spanish were either incredibly poor marksmen, or they had impossibly deficient weapons. In either case, one thing is clear. Spanish conduct in Cuba surpassed in atrocity anything in the annals of history.¹⁷

Blood has dropped like a tropic rain
O'er the long path worn by the feet of Spain.¹⁸

Something must be done. "No human person could hear on adjacent possessions the cries of a child, a wife, or apprentice daily tortured by a cruel superior, without . . . bravely risking all consequences and intervening on behalf of outraged humanity."¹⁹

The outraged humanity in New Orleans was also reminded that it had historical reasons to know the perfidious Spaniard. Had not Spain fomented Western secessionism through James Wilkinson; repealed the right of Western deposit at New Orleans; and allowed her territory at Pensacola to be an asylum for the savages who had ravaged the frontier? And had not Spain continually interfered with American ships in the Caribbean? Could the French ever forget the wanton executions of the noblest Creoles by O'Reilly, merely for protesting against the surrender of Louisiana to Spain?²⁰

The recently executed men were likened to Kosciusko and Lafayette; Steuben and Charles Lee. All had gone abroad to fight for liberty's sake. Now let the city recall her response to the cry, "Remember the Alamo!" Let her remember and avenge the fate of Lopez and Crittenden. So up, men of New Orleans! "It was the best blood of Louisiana which has been

¹⁷ *Picayune*, Nov. 21; *Republican*, Nov. 21; *Picayune*, Dec. 11, Nov. 26.

¹⁸ *Republican*, Nov. 30.

¹⁹ *Republican*, Nov. 28.

²⁰ *Republican*, Nov. 19, Dec. 12, Dec. 20, Nov. 21.

spilt by Spain in the past time; in the days of Villere and Lefebvre. In the Lopez expedition it was the blood of our sons poured out, and now one of our citizens welters in his blood in the isle of Santiago de Cuba.”²¹

The most shameful appeal to the past was a recounting by the New Orleans *Herald* of the riots against the New Orleans Spanish in 1851, in response to the news of the fate of the Lopez expedition. While deploring these attacks, the *Herald* invitingly printed a list of present Spanish residents with their addresses, whose occupations were similar to those assaulted before. However, the *Herald* was taken to task for this, and it was declared that a repetition of 1851 was now impossible. “The conflict, when it comes, will not be between residents of New Orleans.”²²

Business was freely mixed with pleasure. The Spanish were not only outraging humanity, they were hindering commerce by levying a duty of 80 percent average on agricultural imports into Cuba. Whatever their political differences, Republicans and Democrats could agree that free trade would benefit New Orleans as nothing else would do. Some concern was expressed early as to whether the acquisition of Cuba would not utterly destroy the sugar industry in Louisiana. But as the war fever mounted, so did business optimism. The concern over local sugar was answered by an avowal that the western provision trade, the planters, and the laborers all would gain by opening the ports of Cuba. As everyone knew, “Spain loves Cuba to the amount of about twenty-six millions a year revenue.”²³

The most glowing picture of the commercial future was painted by the *Picayune* when it predicted that if Cuba were freed, all the other islands would soon follow her to form a Republican archipelago under one government with free trade.

The result as affecting New Orleans would be most important. Havana would become the granary for an immense area of country and the purchaser of vast amounts of cot-

²¹ *Republican*, Dec. 10, Nov. 15, Nov. 21; *Picayune*, Nov. 22.

²² *Republican*, Dec. 9.

²³ *Republican*, Nov. 6, 11; *Picayune*, Nov. 16; *Republican*, Nov. 18; *Picayune*, Nov. 23.

ton. Supplying this city with the cheapest manufactured Commodities at the shortest notice and by the shortest route, it would receive in return the raw products which be at the foundation of commercial wealth.

With free Cuba, and free Cuban ports, New Orleans can vie with New York as a mart for all manufactured articles, and can supply the entire Mississippi Valley with the cheapest commodities by way of the cheapest highways.²⁴

So much for the long range benefits of war. For those more interested in immediate results, there were also good prospects. They might hope for a navy yard. "In the impetus given to naval affairs by the Cuban excitement, and the accounts we read of great activity in all the navy yards in the Eastern cities, and at Pensacola, the question arises, why should there not be a dock yard at this port . . .?" The editor could find no good reason why there should not be. And in view of its closeness, both to Cuba and western supplies, plus its year-round good weather, New Orleans was virtually certain of becoming a base of military equipment and naval supply. The importance of this "in the event of a conflict in continental waters cannot be too highly appreciated by our dealers in all commodities to be affected by such an event."²⁵

Finally, there was the long-felt and manifest destiny of the Americans to acquire adjacent territory. A lawyer, writing to the editor, deplored all the talk of legal issues claiming, "As long as a majority of the American people are disposed to acquire Cuba," there was little use reasoning about the law. To this the editor replied that he saw no great desire to acquire Cuba "unless it be in the manner that Texas came into the Union." The immediate task was to make Cuba free, "leaving the question of acquisition for future consideration." Others were not so content to wait. At a rally, the audience was urged to work and fight for freedom in Cuba "until the flag that waves over us has another star, and perhaps two."²⁶

From England came press assurances that the purpose of

²⁴ *Picayune*, Nov. 26.

²⁵ *Picayune*, Nov. 26; *Republican*, Dec. 4.

²⁶ *Republican*, Nov. 18, 19, 22.

freeing Cuba was one with which the English had little quarrel "even if it should end in the transfer of Cuba to the United States," while from Washington came assurances that war would result in annexation. And from hell, the ghost of the infamous Duke of Alva was summoned to "serve as a rallying cry for those who hope the massacre of American citizens on board the *Virginus* may transform the Queen of the Antilles into an American island." ²⁷

A new reason for annexation was advanced by the *Picayune* when it suggested that the only cure for the current situation in the South was to provide an outlet for the Negroes. This, the paper speculated, was what had motivated Grant's efforts to acquire San Domingo. If San Domingo could serve that purpose, how much better could Cuba. (Inconsistency did not perturb the *Picayune*. Three days after the above argument appeared, the paper sought to calm fears that an annexed Cuba would duplicate the problems of Southern states. It predicted the colored would soon be lost in crowds of "enterprising" whites who would "flock" there.) ²⁸

But the chief argument for annexation was that of destiny. Calling Cuba not the "sick man" but the "crazy man" of this continent the *Republican* stated it thus:

Passing over and by, all diplomatic correspondence, and declining in advance all proffers of satisfaction, the government of the United States should at once proceed . . . [to occupy] . . . the Island of Cuba. . . . In this occupation the United States will go it alone. She wants no European co-protectorate. The master of the diplomatic position on this continent, she must discard the ideas and the intervention of European advisors. A destiny is before us. It must be conducted upon American and not upon European policy.²⁹

Most of the reasons put forth for intervention were well summed up, perhaps, in the order of their motivating weight, by Alexander H. Stephens:

²⁷ *Picayune*, Dec. 3, Nov. 20, 25; *Republican*, Nov. 23.

²⁸ *Picayune*, Nov. 23, 27.

²⁹ *Republican*, Nov. 21.

He says . . . that we must get Cuba at all hazards, with or without war. He thinks as an investment it is important to have the island; that under the fostering care of the United States government her population, which is now about one and one half millions, would, in a very few years increase to ten millions; and that while Spain now derives from the island a revenue of about \$25,000,000 annually, it would yield to the United States in a short time at least \$100,000,000. He urges that every consideration is in favor of the acquisition of Cuba by the United States. He also holds that on the score of humanity it is our duty to extend her a helping hand. . . . In justice to ourselves and in response to every generous impulse it is our duty to interfere. . . . He believed the Southern people generally were in favor of annexation.³⁰

As one paper in New Orleans slyly admitted, the "Question of the Day" was "Have you selected your corner lot in Cuba yet?"³¹

The effort to summon up the blood achieved its goal. Not long after the first news of the capture had broken, many on the streets were wearing a red and blue ribbon in their button-holes as a token for Cuba. War was the principal topic of conversation.

Knots of old soldiers were grouped here and there on Canal Street discussing the question with considerable warmth. From all sides we hear the expression of a desire to volunteer the moment the opportunity is offered. Those who have seen fire before say 5,000 men could be raised in this city in a week should a call be made.³²

In a short time, a telegraph to Grant offered the services of 5,000 "gallant Irish-American soldiers" from New Orleans. Lee's old war horse, Longstreet, went further to offer 25,000 men, of whom it appeared at least 10,000 would come from the city.³³

Longstreet was vice-president at the first rally held on November 9, where over \$8000 was collected and much more

³⁰ *Picayune*, Dec. 2.

³¹ *Picayune*, Nov. 25.

³² *Picayune*, Nov. 16, Nov. 15.

³³ *Picayune*, Nov. 21, Nov. 20; *Republican*, Nov. 21.

promised. Eleven days later, an immense meeting crowded Exposition Hall to overflowing. Such a sea of faces, the assembly was informed, means war with Spain.³⁴

Other assemblies took up the protest. A previously scheduled convention of colored men found its agenda frequently side-tracked by resolutions concerning the "outrages upon American citizens and the American flag." Fears were expressed lest the forthcoming People's Convention find Louisiana's case overshadowed by Cuba's. In far off Madrid, the newspaper *Imparcial* felt constrained to reproach the United States for permitting these meetings in New Orleans.³⁵

A second reproach must have been drawn from persons with literary sensitivity. The excitement moved a local poet to write:

Caught on the sea and shot on the shore!
 Santa Maria! There were but four,
 And what was that but a mere beginning,
 A bite before lunch on a beggar's winning,
 To souls whose hunger clamoured for more.

 Glory enough for one golden day
 With blood to follow and no delay

 Caught on the sea and shot on the shore!
 'Twas a merchant ship and nothing more.³⁶

Those who survived the poetry encountered coy advertisements. The unwary confronted such gems as: "The Cuban excitement is just like the sensation produced when Puck's Brilliant stoves are on the tapis." Or, "The sudden fitting out of monitors and gunboats, although of a belligerent aspect, cannot in any way affect the fitting out of men in elegant furnishing goods, and boys and children in jaunty little suits at Walsh's popular and attractive bazaar." Or again, "A Still Greater and Indiscriminate Slaughter—Kreegar has not only made but maintains an unmistakable reputation for cheap

³⁴ *Price Current*, Nov. 12; *Picayune*, Nov. 22.

³⁵ *Republican*, Nov. 19; *Picayune*, Nov. 25, Dec. 17.

³⁶ *Republican*, Nov. 30.

goods." And, "Wanted—Everybody to purchase portraits of the murdered Cuban Patriots. Upon receipt of 50 cents we will send, postpaid, an elegant life-like portrait of either Captain Fry, General Ryan, or General Varona. All three for \$1." ³⁷

Inspired also by the war fervor was a musical composition, "Viva Cuba Quickstep," of which, perhaps fortunately, only the title remains. ³⁸

An immediate outlet for aroused emotions was provided by a fund-raising campaign for the widow of the "gallant Captain Fry." Southern hearts were appealed to by the refugee General Quesada, and they responded at once. Editorials and letters endorsed the appeal. When Fry's four years in the service of the Confederacy and his seven fatherless children were considered, who could fail to be moved? One gentleman offered to raffle one of his "finest and best made light trotting buggies," and another volunteered to print all the tickets necessary for the raffle. The Dramatic Association scheduled a benefit performance. Even children contributed, one "noble little boy" giving twenty-five cents of his pennies for the hero's bereft family. ³⁹

As for that "Southern gentleman," Captain Fry himself, the sentiment of the hour was "Peace to his ashes, and may the blood of the martyr prove the seed of free and independent Cuba." Archbishop Perche celebrated the sacred and solemn requiem office for the repose of the dead patriots. ⁴⁰

Perhaps the most telling indication of the extent to which the city had been stirred was the degree of unanimity which prevailed. "On no occasion for a quarter of a century have the people of all sections of the Union been so united upon a question as upon this of launching the power of our government against the Cuban authorities." So said the Democratic press. It found the horrors of war mitigated in the minds of good and patriotic men "by the prospect of a reunited North and South." The Republican journal agreed. Chiding Hamilton

³⁷ *Picayune*, Nov. 23, Nov. 14, 16, 21.

³⁸ *Picayune*, Dec. 3.

³⁹ *Picayune*, Nov. 16, Dec. 4, 7, 19, Nov. 25.

⁴⁰ *Picayune*, Nov. 28, Nov. 14.

Fish, Grant's Secretary of State, for his slowness to act, it proclaimed, "There is no distinction of race, class, or color in the mass of citizens who demand action."⁴¹

When a great mass demonstration was planned, the Democratic gubernatorial claimant, John McEnery, took a hand in the arrangements. A committee of fifteen from each party was appointed, "As this is a question on which every person, no matter what his political opinion, may meet."⁴²

The meeting was "composed of Americans of every national denomination. Both the white and the African races were intermixed in the audience and represented on the platform. . . . There was an entire unification of sentiment and of purpose which no political combinations or compromise could have effected." The enthusiastic audience which contained "so many of the best citizens of New Orleans . . ." heard rousing proclamations from both ex-Confederates and freed slaves. Said one Southern speaker:

Our war is over. Whatever differences once separated us they are gone now. One flag shelters, one government protects us all. We, as Southern people, as ex-rebels if you will, today yield to no man under God's heaven in our desire for the welfare, honor and integrity of the nation.⁴³

A Negro speaker promised, "The colored men of this state will go into the battle and if necessary will take the lead. . . . We can stand hand in hand and side by side with the white men of our country in this battle." At this speaker's side, a former Confederate officer pledged not to rest until the stain of slavery had been wiped from the American continent. "We . . . brothers in the lost cause," he said, "intend to show . . . if necessary by our blood, that when we took our oath of allegiance, after our arms were laid down, that we intend to keep it. . . . Let us all unite and join heartily in the struggle."⁴⁴

This gathering, declared the *Republican*, "will prove that Americans, without regard to color, past condition or opinions

⁴¹ *Picayune*, Nov. 14, 23; *Republican*, Nov. 19.

⁴² *Picayune*, Nov. 15.

⁴³ *Republican*, Nov. 23, Nov. 22.

⁴⁴ *Picayune*, Nov. 22; *Republican*, Nov. 22, 23.

on other questions, are determined to avenge the honor of the American flag. . . . The whole Southern people will only contend who can carry the American flag furthest.”⁴⁵

From every quarter, volunteers offered their services. Proven Confederate officers like Beauregard, Forrest, Pickett and Mosby proclaimed their readiness to lead troops once again. Many Southern officers urged that nothing would do so much to bring a fraternal feeling at home as war with a foreign nation. “The war had past [*sic*],” said one, “and we, the ex-rebels, if it please people to call us so, yield to no man in allegiance to the flag that waves over this whole government.” General Longstreet’s recent association with the Republicans was temporarily forgotten as rumors circulated that he had received important messages from Washington. Lee’s old “warrior” offered to raise 25,000 troops, as Grant announced his perfect confidence in the Confederate soldiers and promised an equal distribution of commissions in the event of war. “The alienation of sections is rapidly passing away,” it was hopefully stated, and “one blow upon the shield of Columbia will summon all her sons to her defense.” General Sherman’s expressed concern over the state of the army was made little of in New Orleans. “Are not fifty thousand volunteers ready at the South alone to precipitate themselves upon Cuba? Do they need drill and discipline? Why, the boys who marched under the cross of St. Andrew have not yet reached middle age. The scaling of Moro Castle would be nothing to the storming of Malvern Hill!” What could a Republican say except, “We are very proud of a people who can look upon an outrage upon the nation as paramount to an alleged sectional injustice, and stand by the common flag even when under a sense of sectional discontent. The American people will remember . . . [that] the services of all her sons . . . have been tendered from all quarters.”⁴⁶

The rival factions in New Orleans also shared a mutual feel-

⁴⁵ *Republican*, Nov. 23.

⁴⁶ *Republican*, Nov. 23, Dec. 24; *Picayune*, Nov. 23, Dec. 6; *Picayune*, Nov. 23, Nov. 22, Nov. 29, Nov. 20, Dec. 6; *Republican*, Dec. 25; *Picayune*, Nov. 16; *Republican*, Nov. 20.

ing against those Northern and Eastern journals that were dragging their heels a little. Taking the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Times* to task, the *Republican* complained.

It has been observed that certain journals of the North have, from the first, attached little importance to these outrages. . . . It is very plain that moneyed and shipping interests of the East are, and have always been, well represented before the Department of State. . . . Were the man alive who made the *New York Tribune* . . . he would have proclaimed that the duty of the government was 'On to Cuba!' . . . We regret to observe such a tone in a Republican journal.⁴⁷

The *Picayune* was equally reproachful of the reluctant Northern press, charging it with displaying ingratitude toward the colored man, "preferring to leave him in bondage to bringing him into the Union as an American Sovereign."⁴⁸

Both journals sprang to the defense of Captain Fry when Northern papers resurrected old charges that he had caused his troops to fire needlessly upon the crew of a disabled federal vessel. Fry's connection with the Confederacy had been forgiven by his Republican admirers in New Orleans.⁴⁹

As an observer wrote, "No event that has transpired during the past ten years had produced such a unanimity of sentiment in this city as the recent wholesale butchery of the passengers and the crew of the *Virginus*. . . . The horrid details of that atrocious affair have aroused a feeling of indignation in the minds of all, the whites and the blacks, Democrats and Republicans, and . . . the members of the various religious denominations." With the Spaniard to hate, other hatreds could be laid aside for the moment.⁵⁰

The sense of indignation, the desire for emancipation and annexation, the martial spirit, were emotions that continued to animate Republican and Democrat in New Orleans, even after settlement seemed assured. When the terms were announced, the *Picayune* claimed, "Spain has not yielded and Secretary

⁴⁷ *Republican*, Dec. 14.

⁴⁸ *Picayune*, Nov. 26.

⁴⁹ *Picayune*, Dec. 6; *Republican*, Dec. 6, 10, Nov. 30.

⁵⁰ *Republican*, Nov. 21.

Fish has in effect surrendered the whole question." The paper was especially provoked over the importance attached to the legality of the *Virginus*' papers. "We all know, and have known from the outset, that her claim in this respect was pretended and not valid." It was rather the executions that had been the real issue all along.⁵¹

Thus when it looked as if the Spanish in Cuba might disobey and refuse to deliver the ship, the war drums went on beating. But so did the process of negotiation continue. The difficulty over deliverance of the vessel was solved. When Secretary Fish announced that "Everything goes smoothly," his own party's organ in New Orleans exploded. "'Going on smoothly!' Wait till these prisoners shall have been heard as they will be throughout the United States." Calling the vessel now just an empty coffin, the paper went on, "They can butcher another lot of Americans to-morrow and telegraph us, 'We send over another lot of coffins and carcasses.'"⁵²

No less disgusted was the *Picayune*. "Every day develops some new and more mortifying illustration of the utterly unsatisfactory character of the reparation obtained by Secretary Fish."⁵³

Suspensions were voiced of a secret deal with Spain, while the demand was made that Spain be forced to salute the American flag in Santiago harbor with Burriel directing the ceremony. It was devoutly hoped that while Secretary Fish and Attorney-General Williams were satisfying their legal doubts, the tonnage and weight of metal in West Indian waters was being increased. When the disputed vessel finally sank after having been surrendered to the United States, the *Republican* warned, "It would be fortunate for Spain, perhaps, if the murder of the officers and crew . . . could be disposed of so easily."⁵⁴

So it went. When the first news came that the *Virginus* had been seized and that Americans in her crew had been executed

⁵¹ *Picayune*, Dec. 3.

⁵² *Republican*, Dec. 14.

⁵³ *Picayune*, Dec. 27.

⁵⁴ *Picayune*, Dec. 27; *Republican*, Dec. 12, 27; *Picayune*, Dec. 27; *Republican*, Dec. 23, 31.

by Spaniards, New Orleans was in the throes of her reconstruction problems. Almost at once, the old desire to annex Cuba resurged. All of the familiar arguments plus some new ones were put forth. The bitter strife between radical and conservative went on, but here at least was one issue on which they agreed. While the crisis lasted, it took first place in the news and in the editorials, evoking a striking unanimity of views. The Republicans joined the Southern Democrats in condemning Secretary Fish's dulcet diplomacy and Grant's inaction which they suspected was influenced by Eastern money. The Democrats joined the Republicans in urging emancipation. Had war then resulted, it seems possible that the wounds of reconstruction would have been healed or at least greatly improved by the balm of a popular war against Spain. The intense desire to conquer Cuba and the rapidity with which this issue overshadowed for a time the reconstruction rancors suggests that there was less abatement of the lower South's interest in acquiring Cuba during the strained Reconstruction period than has been thought. Moreover, the argument that Cuba should be taken to free its slaves intimates that the South's antebellum interest in Cuba was not simply a search for more slave territory. It was Cuba that was wanted for its own sake, then as later. In seeking this end every propaganda device, every atrocity story, every argument of national interest that could be used was used—long before Hearst and Pulitzer made their appearance.

In the end, diplomacy prevailed. But the Crescent City was not satisfied. Soon a reckoning would be had. As the Spanish minister, Admiral Polo, wisely remarked, "If you must have the island, if that is what you call 'manifest destiny,' take it, if you can, but get a stronger case than that of the *Virginus* as a pretext for aggression."⁵⁵

Just twenty-five years later, another vessel lay in the bottom of Havana Harbor. There must have been many New Orleanians who could recall the *Virginus* as they remembered the *Maine*.

⁵⁵ *Republican*, Dec. 3, 4; *Picayune*, Dec. 3, Dec. 4, Dec. 3.