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19.

ANONYMOUS: The Late Cuba Expedition

President James K. Polk's offer to Spain, in 1848, to purchase Cuba for \$100 million was not unprecedented. The island, only ninety miles from Florida, had been under the watchful eye of statesmen since Jefferson's time. It seemed logical to Americans that Cuba would one day belong to the United States; the needs of defense and of commerce as well as the promptings of Manifest Destiny seemed to make its acquisition inevitable. As long as Spain refused to sell, the United States was determined that Cuba would never be transferred to another foreign power. Between 1849 and 1851 private citizens were encouraged to support an unofficial expedition to win Cuba from Spain. The expedition, under the leadership of General Narciso López, after failure in 1849, reorganized in 1850 at New Orleans with strong support from Southerners who hoped to gain Cuba as slave territory. This attempt also failed, as did a third the following year. The expedition of 1850 is the subject of the following article, reprinted in part, from De Bow's Review.

Source: *De Bow's Review*, August 1850.

WHOEVER HAS FOLLOWED THE COURSE of the United States for the last half century without noting the growth of a *military spirit*, diffusing itself through all classes of society and ready, at any moment, to develop itself in every form of action, has observed to very little purpose. It was this spirit which almost defied the vigilance of Washington when Genet would have precipitated the West upon New Orleans — this which dictated the schemes of Burr, clamored for a part in the wars of Napoleon, and received with huzzas the proclamation of Mr. Madison's government of hostilities with England. Emboldened by the results of this brilliant war, the American eagle has plumed its pinions for a flight still nearer to the sun. Miniature West Points have sprung up in every state and on every hilltop, inducting young sinews for the toils of the camp and the battlefield, counseling discipline and strategy, and inspiring admiration for "nodding plumes" and "dazzling crests."

How otherwise, in such a school, could American militia bayonets have else than bristled along the Maine frontier when the occupation of disputed territory was threatened by British soldiery? How otherwise but the genius of the wisest and the greatest statesman should be sorely taxed in preventing the execution, by force of arms, of the threat, "The whole of Oregon or none"? How otherwise, the call of Texas attracts legions of soldiers to her standard from our midst, and the proclamation of war with Mexico is received with illuminations and bonfires, and the tender, in a few months, as Mr. Polk is said to have admitted, of the *voluntary services* in the field of 200,000 men?

What have been the results of this Mexican War? They are but of yesterday, and we remember the intense excitement, from the Aroostook to the Columbia Valley; the illuminations, the bonfires, the banners, the shouts, the processions; the returning heroes, drawn in chariots over multitudes of

s, as great cities move from their foundations, in the figure of Cicero, to receive on their triumphant advances; the led drum, the reversed arms, the toll of the stifled sobs, the somber pageant, eloquent Periclesian eulogiums, the inia and the reward of the dead warrior, from the field of his fame, fresh and new." The people, in a delirium of joy, come the return of their champions and in no chaplets of fame too glittering for brows.

The warrior captain becomes the civil of the great nation; his immediate patriots crown congressional, diplomat-gubernatorial, and legislative seats; the altern and veriest soldiery have a potent in the ballot box, and distance all competition in the race for office! Shall not they have borne the heat and burden of the reap the greater reward? And the arm which was mighty to protect and defend in hour of danger, must it not be guided a heart pure and incorrupt, and earnestly citous of the public weal, in peace or in war? What higher preparation or fitness for peace can be required than these?

"The curtain has fallen upon the first act American history," said the great statesman who, but the other day, went down to his grave, "and, for the first time, all before me is dark." With the Mexican War the nation entered upon a new career which was predicted of her, and to which her institutions and position peculiarly inclined — of war and conquest! Shall we essay to draw the curtain from the future?

The military spirit of the country has been [aroused] and is rife for anything, and we owe to the power that shall endeavor to subvert it. Administrations will fall to pieces at a blow; statesmen will not dare the ostracism of its voice. The cry of war is flattering to our pride and our power, and they are either of them equal to that of any other nation, ancient or modern. The field before us is boundless, and the power that

broods over it grows every day in energy, in resources, and in magnitude, and will be as resistless in time as the whirlwind. Armed bands will sally from our ports, as in days of yore from the Northern hive, covertly, often openly, in the service of every power that shall offer emolument and glory. Our sympathies with freedom, everywhere, are first the incentive; but there will, in time, be other and less honorable incentives.

We have a destiny to perform, "a manifest destiny" over all Mexico, over South America, over the West Indies and Canada. The Sandwich Islands are as necessary to our Eastern, as the isles of the Gulf to our Western, commerce. The gates of the Chinese Empire must be thrown down by the men from the Sacramento and the Oregon, and the haughty Japanese trampers upon the cross be enlightened in the doctrines of republicanism and the ballot box. The eagle of the republic shall poise itself over the field of Waterloo, after tracing its flight among the gorges of the Himalaya or the Ural Mountains, and a successor of Washington ascend the chair of universal empire! These are the giddy dreams of the day. The martial spirit must have its employ. The people stand ready to hail tomorrow, with shouts and enthusiasm, a collision with the proudest and the mightiest empire upon earth. The valley of the Mississippi alone will arm its half million of stout woodsmen, hardy hunters, deadly rifles, for any field where the cause of liberty and glory shall call. Thus is it.

Have a care how we trifle with this tremendous power, or unduly excite it, and let us not cease to admire the foresight of that Spanish minister, the Count of Aranda, who said, in 1783:

The federal republic is a pygmy in its cradle; she has needed the support of two states, powerful like France and Spain, to obtain independence. The day will come when she will be a giant — a formidable colossus even in these parts.

She will forget the services received from those countries, and will only think of her own aggrandizement.

These reflections, rather too much extended perhaps, have been induced by the late attempt upon the island of Cuba by a party of adventurers under our flag and embarking from our ports. We are willing, at the outset, to accord to the leader of the expedition the highest motives of patriotism and honor, and to the hundreds who flocked around his standard many generous, though perhaps misdirected, impulses and sympathies, without questioning there were others, at the same time, moved by the most sordid considerations.

The signal failure of the enterprise and all the attendant circumstances of it have been such as to provoke derision rather than admiration or respect; and the parties having themselves braved the ordeal must be content with that obloquy which the want of success will ever inspire. The Abbé Raynal long ago laid down the principle with unerring precision: "I acknowledge that men accustomed to judge of things by the event call great and perilous resolutions heroism or madness, according to the good or bad success which attends them." Accordingly, in every part of the Union, denunciation grows pregnant, despite the evidences that the cause of the Cuba invaders and patriots was a few weeks ago a highly popular one, receiving the sympathies of the multitude and attracting, in the highest quarters, the most favorable consideration.

The movers and instigators are brought before the tribunals of the country for an infraction of its laws and the statute of 1818 attempted to be enforced against them. Now, although it be true, as we think not improbable, that this offense does not come within the *strict letter* of the statute, however its spirit be clearly isolated, yet, why were the agents of the government so fast asleep during the many weeks when it was notorious to the country that an

armed expedition was in progress? Will it be maintained that the facilities of communication with Washington are less than with Cuba — the governor-general of which had timely notice of every movement, long, even, before the sailing of the expedition? Why not use the telegraph in arresting the parties and preventing this great infraction, as it is alleged, of our neutral duties? The telegraph was not idle at another stage of the business.

It is difficult to distinguish this case, upon principle, from that of the Texan revolution, 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. The Cubans were not in arms, but revolution may begin long before a standard is erected or a sword drawn from its scabbard. Contributing money, conducting correspondence are as much overt acts of rebellion or treason as open revolt, and do not distinguish the parties, in the eye of the law and government, from those that are actually in the field. Were the Cubans so far committed? The evidences are not wanting that they were, and that contributions of money and the warmest protestations of sympathy and vows of hearty cooperation did emanate from that quarter to encourage and cheer the movement.

The rebutting circumstance is the cold reception which they gave to the men at Cardenas. We are bound, in our search after truth, to consider this of little weight. They must have been bold and hardy revolutionists, indeed — supposing that external aid was indispensable to their cause — to regard that which landed in the Creole as at all adequate to the exigence. A mere handful — where it is believed ten times the number had been expected — and a handful, too, whose movements had long before been known to the authorities of the island;

The Annals of America: 1850

), with extraordinary vigilance, were wing armies of disciplined soldiers upon any assailable point and scouring the Gulf with their fleets. The landing at Cardenas could only have been considered a piece of American quixoticism, of which it seems we are capable when occasion requires.

It is not clear, at this moment, how far the interference of our government was in consonance with the letter and spirit of the treaty stipulations with Spain, or with the intentions of the act of 1818, intended to prevent these cases. The instructions which were issued to the naval commanders dispatched in that quarter have not been officially communicated, and no doubt are misrepresented. That the President may have prohibited the sailing of the expedition is true, and, in a high and liberal interpretation of our duties toward a friendly and weaker power, may have intercepted it afterward and prevented a hostile landing, which might not, perhaps, to be questioned. Any other construction would evidence a sort of orthogonian faith, and that paltering, in a noble sense, which would be at war with international comity.

The power of the executive should be co-extensive with the evil intended to be remedied. Had the expedition landed, we may have gone a step further and admit that reinforcements from our country might have been cut off, but it is a high and delicate matter and likely to be abused. Here the duty of neutrality would have been religiously observed and accomplished, and any expression of sympathy or incidental aid, even the slightest, extended toward the captain general in preventing or suppressing an intended revolt or in making captives, would be a gross and arbitrary assumption of power, which could be tolerated in no administration a single hour. There are no proofs of anything like this against the federal authorities, and we are to presume they did their duty. . . .

That this, the second unsuccessful attempt upon Cuba within a few months, is but the beginning of the end which looks to the acquisition of that island by the United States can hardly be a subject of debate. American and Spanish blood has been shed, and the bitter feelings of consequence engendered upon both sides will long survive the occasion, indulging itself in petty acts of jealousy — in ill-concealed hostility — incrimination and recrimination. Already the islanders loudly boast of their heroic onslaught upon the Buena Vista Yankees, and search their vocabulary for every term of opprobrium and contempt to heap upon their heads. Bravely, it must be admitted, almost chivalrously, as they did act, these glorifications are not likely to produce a pleasant tingle upon American ears unaccustomed to such sounds from others than themselves. It is not improbable that our citizens, now or hereafter in the island, will be subjected to vexatious restrictions growing out of these matters, and that, in the haughtiness of almost unexpected triumph, the authorities will be guilty of some infractions upon their rights and privileges. . . .

None can doubt that at this moment there is a well-fixed and almost universal conviction upon the minds of our people that the possession of Cuba is indispensable to the proper development and security of the country. We state the fact, without entering into the reasons of it or justifying it, that such a conviction exists. Call it the lust of dominion, the restlessness of democracy, the passion for land and gold, or the desire to render our interior impregnable by commanding the keys of the Gulf — the possession of Cuba is still an American sentiment, not to be sure a late but a growing and strengthening one. We trust, for the honor of humanity and the faith of treaties, it will lead us into nothing for which our history shall blush.