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Spreading the Flames: The United States, Cuba, and the Fear of Africanization

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Abstract

In the years leading up to the Civil War, the fight over slavery played out in many different arenas, notably in Kansas and Nebraska. While Bleeding Kansas was arguably the most well-known and violent clash over slavery before the Civil War, there were others as well. One flash point over the question of slavery resulted from political unrest in Cuba. In the 1850s, Spain owned Cuba, an economically prosperous island with an economy based on African slave labor. However, Spain was under pressure from Great Britain to end slavery in Cuba, and because Spain was in enormous debt and was financially reliant on the British, who were morally opposed to slavery, the Spanish government began to take steps towards abolishing it. They started the process by counting how many slaves were on the island and how many each owner possessed. They also let slaves find other jobs, as long as they returned some of their earnings back to their owners. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Africanization, Cuba, James Buchanan, Ostend Manifesto, Slavery

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Spreading the Flames: The United States, Cuba, and the Fear of Africanization

By [*Savannah Labbe '19*](#)

In the years leading up to the Civil War, the fight over slavery played out in many different arenas, notably in Kansas and Nebraska. While Bleeding Kansas was arguably the most well-known and violent clash over slavery before the Civil War, there were others as well. One flash point over the question of slavery resulted from political unrest in Cuba. In the 1850s, Spain owned Cuba, an economically prosperous island with an economy based on African slave labor. However, Spain was under pressure from Great Britain to end slavery in Cuba, and because Spain was in enormous debt and was financially reliant on the British, who were morally opposed to slavery, the Spanish government began to take steps towards abolishing it. They started the process by counting how many slaves were on the island and how many each owner possessed. They also let slaves find other jobs, as long as they returned some of their earnings back to their owners.

These measures and the issues in Cuba frightened some Americans, including many Southerners, who feared “Africanization.” Africanization, or the prospect of the island and its government coming into the hands of newly-freed black citizens, was seen as a threat to the island’s white landowners as well as the United States itself. This kind of unrest in Cuba could spread, like a fire, to the United States. In addition, as James Buchanan—then the minister to Great Britain—wrote in the Ostend Manifesto that discussed the US-Cuba situation, Americans would be “unworthy of [their] gallant forefathers” if they allowed “Cuba to be Africanized and become a second [Haiti], with all its attendant horrors to the white race.” The United States felt they had to do something. Military filibustering, a type of irregular warfare used to incite a revolution or some form of political change, was going on in Cuba already. However, these efforts to overthrow Spanish rule of Cuba by force were not producing results, so the government under President Franklin Pierce decided to pursue a more public policy-oriented approach to the issue. Pierce then directed three of his European diplomats to meet in Ostend, Belgium to discuss options.

[JANUARY 7, 1860.

VANITY FAIR.



THE BEWILDERED OLD WOMAN.

MRS. J. B.—“SAVES ALIVE! I KNOW NO NORTH, NO SOUTH, NO EAST, NO WEST—NO NOTHING! AND WHO ON EARTH'S GOING TO TAKE THIS PLAGUY MESSAGE?”

Political cartoon depicting Buchanan as a bewildered old woman, not knowing what to do with the Ostend Manifesto and the issue of Cuba. “The Bewildered Old Woman,” 1860, GettDigital: Civil War Era Collection, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 2/12/18, <https://gettysburg.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4016coll2/id/268/rec/12>.

Buchanan, along with minister to Great Britain J.Y Mason and minister to Spain Pierre Soule, were the three diplomats who would eventually pen the Ostend Manifesto. They concluded at their conference that it was in the best interest of the United States to purchase Cuba for as much as \$120,000,000. Cuba was important to the United States economically, and it was in an important position, “[commanding] the mouth of the Mississippi.” This would be an advantageous deal to all parties involved, as the money would help Spain with the “overwhelming debt now paralyzing her energies” and give her extra money to modernize her economy by building railroads. The manifesto also

strongly suggested that if Spain was not open to selling, they would be in “imminent danger of losing Cuba, without remuneration.” In other words, the United States would take it by force. Neither the Spanish nor the American governments acknowledged this document or officially recognized it, and Spain was not willing to sell. However, the document is important because it is an example of the United States’ justifications for continuing imperialism and an additional U.S. government endorsement of slavery. It is also an interesting example of “gunboat diplomacy,” in which the United States threatened force to get what they wanted. While the Manifesto was endorsed by Pierce to begin with, the uproar that it caused between the sections of the United States made him unable to recognize the document and forced him to distance himself from it. In addition, Pierce’s interest in Cuba was overshadowed by domestic issues, such as the problems in Kansas.

An interesting question arises from this issue: why was the United States so interested in Cuba when they had so much going on at home? Perhaps the president and other politicians were trying to distract people from the domestic strife, but Cuba could have erupted into violence between the North and the South just as easily. Northerners were angered by the manifesto, as it was a clear attempt by Southerners to spread slavery and increase their power in congress. While the South could gain much from Cuba, the North saw little potential, as the island would mostly be divided into multiple slave states. It seems that this episode in our history was a result of a Southern-dominated government. The South feared that a neighbor so close to them being free would possibly, in the words of the manifesto, spread the “flames” of insurrection to “seriously endanger or actually consume the fair fabric of our Union.” The memory of the Haitian Revolution, in which slaves freed themselves and rose up against the French, ended in 1804 and was fresh in Southern minds. This was exactly what Southerners feared—a slave uprising resulting in a new government led by former slaves. Such an uprising could spread and produce disastrous socio-political results in the southern United States. The best way to prevent such a subversion of power was to control Cuba, and thus, Southerners pushed the American government to buy it.

Despite Northern concerns, the government, most notably Franklin Peirce and his secretary of state, intended to build upon the expansionist legacy of James Polk. Hence, they continued to pursue their course on Cuba, and it cost them. In the 1854 mid-term elections, the Democrats lost their majority in the House and now had no hope of getting Congress to appropriate funds for Cuba. In addition, the Cuba issue, along with Bleeding Kansas, caused a split in the Democratic Party between Northern and Southern Democrats over the issue of slavery. This split proved irreparable and would continue to deepen during the Buchanan’s presidency. It would then help Lincoln rise to power in 1860, as the Northern and Southern Democrats each supported a different candidate, splitting the Democratic vote and making it easier for Lincoln to gain a majority. Because of the split in the party and growing Northern hostility to the measure, the idea of acquiring Cuba was dropped. However, there was much potential for Cuba to become another Bleeding Kansas as filibusters continued to try to annex Cuba by force. If these efforts had worked, or if Cuba had been purchased by the United States, the Civil War may have taken a different turn, starting earlier and erupting over the issue of Cuba.

Even still, Cuba played a significant, but often overlooked role in the coming of the war. The Cuba question illuminates the valuable contributions that a more international or global approach to the study of the Civil War can reveal about this tenuous time in American history.

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