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FLORIDA'S RELATIONS WITH CUBA DURING THE CIVIL WAR

by JAMES W. CORTADA *

THE GEOGRAPHICAL proximity of Spain's colony of Cuba to Florida has insured, throughout the nineteenth century, that they would share a unique relationship. Political pundits, military strategists, international businessmen, and later, historians, continually recognized that geography, history, and politics influenced Cuba and Florida, intertwining their affairs. Geography by itself, although an important element in their relations, remained less significant than the much broader political struggle that existed between the United States and Spain over control first of North America, and later over the Caribbean. Florida and Cuba were pawns in this much larger international game of chess that throughout the past century involved France, Great Britain, Spain, and the United States in the New World. These nations, therefore, looked upon Florida and Cuba as fundamental elements in their rivalry for control and influence over the developing American hemisphere.

The center piece of this rivalry between Europe and the Americas was the struggle for control over specific pieces of land between the United States and Spain. In the early part of the nineteenth century, their subject of concern was Florida. By the late 1840s, attention focused on Cuba. No true appreciation of their continuing rivalry can be gained without understanding the special relationship of Florida to Cuba. Although much has been written on the subject, a little-studied period in those relations was that of the American Civil War. The decade of the 1860s illustrated many of the tensions between Spain and the United States, while once again carefully drawing the significance of Florida's geo-political position toward the Caribbean.

For decades prior to the start of the Civil War, the United States had threatened Spain's influence in the New World. In the

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late eighteenth century and during the early years of the nineteenth, the United States had expanded westward across the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia into the valleys of the Ohio to the Rocky mountains and south across the one-time Spanish colonies of Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Texas, the entire Southwest, and eventually into the far western lands of California up to old Spanish colonial sites in the present-day state of Washington. At various moments, war nearly developed between the two nations, and groups of soldiers and pioneers had often shot at one another. Yet, as early as the 1820s, Spain had been pushed off the North American continent, reducing tensions in the northern hemisphere. Florida came under American control, and by the late 1840s, some citizens were casting a hungry look southward at Cuba and the Caribbean. The logic for focusing on Cuba is understood by historians who have outlined the key details of the slave issue, the rise of cotton economics, and the geographical attractiveness of Cuba to the United States.¹ Emphasis in this article will be placed on some of the geo-political and international issues that defined the special relationship of Florida to Cuba; less attention will therefore be paid to the domestic American concerns.

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, many Americans felt that Florida's military security was being threatened by Spain's presence in Cuba. Each passing crisis with Spain generated talk of war in the two countries; both felt the other threatened their interests. There were arguments that Florida could not be protected if the captain-general in Havana decided to send his well-armed military units and ships northward. With the acquisition of California and the discovery of gold there, communications between the eastern United States and the West by ship dictated that sea lanes in the Caribbean be secure.²

1. James W. Cortada, *Two Nations Over Time: Spain and the United States, 1776-1977* (Westport, Conn., 1978), 52-71, 284-93; Arthur F. Corwin, *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817-1886* (Austin, 1967), *passim*; R. Olivar Bertrand, *España y los españoles: cien años atras* (Madrid, 1970), 50-75.
2. A. C. Wilgus, "Official Expression of Manifest Destiny Sentiment Concerning Hispanic-America, 1848-1871," *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 15 (July 1932), 486-506; C. Stanley Urban, "The Ideology of Southern Imperialism: New Orleans and the Caribbean, 1845-1860," *ibid.*, 39 (January 1956), 48-73; David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia, Missouri, 1973), *passim*.

Spain, for its part, increasingly sought to reassert its influence in the New World. Official and public policy dictated that the challenge posed by the United States to Cuba be met with increased military preparedness in Cuba and in Puerto Rico, and by expanded cultural, economic, and political ties to Latin America. Aggressive policies led to more Spanish involvement in the internal affairs of Mexico and Santo Domingo, thereby augmenting the concern that all parties shared about Cuba, Spain, and the United States. Expanding economic opportunities in Spain, a successfully fought war in North Africa, and a period of relative stability in the early 1860s in the Iberian peninsula allowed Spain to consider more assertive measures to protect its diminished empire, efforts which included an expanded military presence in the Caribbean, negotiation of treaties with Latin American governments, and a search for an international alliance with European governments to block American expansion into the Caribbean.³

Changing political and military fortunes suggested that, as the Civil War grew closer, discussions were needed among Americans and Spaniards about the relative importance of Cuba. Some Americans feared that the acquisition of the colony would draw slaves out of southern states (such as Virginia and other border areas), possibly making Cuban plantations more competitive than those on the North American continent. It might also upset the delicate balance-of-power between free and slave states in the Congress. Louisiana sugar plantations could suffer if there were no longer tariff protection to bar importation of Cuban sugar, some of which likely was shipped into this country through the ports of Pensacola and Tampa.

Thus not all Americans were enthusiastic about acquiring Cuba. There was much dialogue regarding slavery at the same time as part of the overall assessment of Cuban-Floridian and Cuban-American contacts. Yet there is little evidence that it was a major issue in Cuban-Florida relations, despite the fact that the slavery controversy was becoming a matter of grave political concern in the United States. There were many reasons for this

3. Jerónimo Becker, *Historia de las relaciones exteriores de España durante el siglo XIX*, 3 vols. (Madrid, 1924-1927), II, 200-400; see also his *Historia política y diplomática desde la independencia de los Estados Unidos hasta nuestros días, 1776-1895* (Madrid, 1897), *passim*.

relative unimportance. Traffic in slaves between the two areas had been limited for several decades by law and economics. International agreements and national laws forbade the general exportation or importation of Africans or slaves from other nations. Cuba imported increasing numbers of slaves in the 1840s and 1850s from Puerto Rico, where both the agricultural economy and an active abolition movement curtailed the demand for a bondage labor pool. Some slaves were smuggled out of North America to Cuba by way of New Orleans and Mobile rather than from Florida during the 1840s and 1850s. Slave trading between Cuba and Florida had, by the 1840s, become an illegal minor traffic.⁴

The outbreak of the Civil War dramatically drew the attention of the Union, Confederacy, and Spain to Florida's geopolitical ties to Cuba. Spain, following the lead of France and Great Britain, acted quickly in declaring its neutrality. Commercial ships of either side could call on Spain while naval vessels would be treated by a different, more stringent set of rules. Spain allowed both sides to call at Cuban ports during the Civil War. At the same time, Spain retained its consulate at Pensacola, instructing its local representative to report on what was happening in the area, while avoiding any official contact with Confederate officials appointed by the government in Richmond, but serving the local Spanish community in normal consular ways.⁵

The Confederacy sought to circumvent the European diplomatic conventions by encouraging the sale of military supplies by Spanish merchants to its armies. Relying at first on New Orleans, Mobile, and Pensacola, Confederate officials sought to import from Cuba European products which it could no longer obtain from the North. These included medical supplies, food, machinery, weapons, and clothing for its soldiers. The Spanish resisted selling the Confederates ammunition and weapons, al-

4. James W. Cortada, "Economic Issues in Caribbean Politics: Rivalry Between Spain and the United States in Cuba, 1848-1898," *Revista de Historia de América*, no. 86 (Julio-Diciembre, 1978), 233-67.

5. Minister of State to Garcia Tassara, January 18, 1861, Spain, Archive of the Foreign Ministry, politica, U.S.A., legajo 2403 (hereinafter cited Sp/file type/country/legajo number); copies of Spanish instructions to all consuls are in Charleston Consular Papers, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

though some small supplies were smuggled out of Cuba by way of Florida into the South. Confederate officials also wanted to use Cuba as a point of contact for convincing the Spanish government to favor their cause. Charles Helm, once an American consul in Havana, represented the Confederacy in Cuba. Although politely acknowledged by the captain-generals, he accomplished little. New Orleans and Mobile in time were either captured or blockaded by Union forces, making Pensacola a major port for commercial relations until Federal naval forces finally closed off most of Florida's coastline.

The Spanish in Havana tolerated trade with the Confederacy on a low-key basis as a means of preserving normal, yet delicate, ties to the South, while not disrupting the Cuban economy any more than was necessary. They feared rousing local dissidents who were already upset with the lack of economic and political reforms on the island. Furthermore, throughout the Civil War, Spanish officials tempered their actions on the chance that the Confederacy might eventually triumph. If that occurred, a new southern government might pose a threat to Spain's control over Cuba; military action could be launched from Louisiana or Florida. It would be important to have the record show that Spain had helped the Confederacy by allowing commercial ties to continue with Havana.⁶

Most of the southern trade was cotton exported to Havana and then to Europe, via Florida ports. Confederate officials traveling to Europe occasionally passed through Florida first on the way to Cuba and the continent. Coming into the Confederacy were supplies of food, cigars, shoes (Spanish army surplus), some medical supplies, and clothing. Much of it was brought in by way of Florida throughout the conflict. Unfortunately, no specific records showing the volume of business have been revealed either in American or Spanish archives. Most trade circumvented normal official channels, and cannot be quantified. Moreover, Spanish officials avoided acknowledging the trade through any systematic tabulation of its activities. However, impressionistic evidence drawn from United States consular reports and colonial records from Havana, now housed in Madrid's *Archivo Histórico*

6. Clifford L. Egan, "Cuba, Spain and the American Civil War," *The Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal*, 5 (October 1968), 58-63.

Nacional, suggest that the traffic was considerable, although sporadic.

The American consulate constantly monitored this traffic as best it could. Every time a transaction was revealed, Federal officials would protest to the colonial government and to the foreign ministry at Madrid. The United States established a maritime blockade around the coastline of the Confederate South during the early months of the Civil War in an attempt to halt Confederate traffic to the outside world and to keep foreign supplies out. At first, the blockade was a "paper" one since there were no Federal ships involved. The Spanish, following normal international practice, argued that the blockade had to be "effective" for any nation to honor it. Spain refused to order traffic from such ports as Pensacola and Tampa turned back at Havana.⁷

Maritime incidents became an important topic of conversation among the involved governments throughout the Civil War. The pattern remained constant. A Confederate ship would leave a Florida, Georgia, or Louisiana port bound for Havana; if it was seized by a Union vessel, possibly in Cuban waters, the Spanish would protest a violation of territorial waters. Other incidents involved Spanish or Cuban ships leaving a southern port only to be boarded by Union naval personnel on the open seas. The Confederates would complain that their ships were not being accorded international protection by the Spanish who allowed Union ships to violate Cuban waters. The Union navy continually expanded its real blockade of southern ports and stationed dozens of ships off Florida, particularly in that band of water south of the Keys and north of Cuba. They also patrolled other widely-used Florida ports. As the Civil War proceeded, the pressure by the Federal navy to occupy important coastal communities in Florida was a logical outgrowth of the Union's strategy of blockading all points of entry for supplies to the Confederacy. Cedar Key on the Gulf coast was attacked in January 1862, and a section of the only cross-state railroad in Florida was destroyed. Shortly afterwards, a Federal flotilla moved against Fernandina, Jacksonville, and St. Augustine. Jacksonville was

7. James W. Cortada, "Relaciones diplomáticas entre los Estados Unidos y España, 1861-1865," *Cuadernos de Historia Económica de Cataluña*, no. 4 (1969-1970), 107-23.

taken four times during the war by the Federals, and they occupied St. Augustine and Fernandina throughout the conflict. The capture of Pensacola and Apalachicola, and the occupation of the fort at Key West, a Union stronghold until the end of the war, gave the Federals virtual control of Florida's east and west coasts. The Federal blockade began to have a major deterrent effect on maritime traffic between Cuba and Florida by the middle of 1863, if not earlier.⁸

Throughout 1861 and 1862, Europe watched to see who would win the Civil War. During this time the governments waited and read battlefield reports, Confederate ships were calling at Cuban ports. The American consulate in Havana, in January 1862, complained that several dozen Confederate ships were in port, some having come from Florida.⁹ Meanwhile, the Union navy was increasing its vigilance off Florida to the point of irritating so many governments through violations of international or Cuban waters that President Lincoln had to order the Navy Department to be more circumspect in its actions.¹⁰ Throughout 1862, Spanish and American diplomats criticized each others' policies regarding maritime traffic. The Spanish concern was summarized by one Spanish foreign office official, Antonio González, who wrote to the foreign minister that, "the defense and security of our interests, the navigation of our ships and the commerce of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Santo Domingo will be restrained if the Northern ships repeat such aggressions."¹¹ By 1864, the Union blockade of Florida had just about sealed off maritime traffic between that state and Cuba. The American consul in Havana noted, in February 1864, that Cuban merchants "have realized the fact that the blockade . . . is very stringent and becoming still more so every day."¹²

8. For details on the Union blockades and their impact on maritime policies and practices see Stuart L. Bernath, *Squall across the Atlantic: American Civil War Prize Cases and Diplomacy* (Berkeley, 1970).

9. Shufeld to William Seward, No. 3, January 13, 1862, United States, Department of Archives, National Archives, Dispatches, Havana, vol. 45 (hereinafter cited US/disp/group/vol), Washington, D.C.

10. Bernath, *Squall across the Atlantic*, 118; Crawford to Russell in a series, No. 11, March 14, 1862; No. 15, April 12, 1862; No. 16, April 18, 1862; Great Britain, Foreign Office Archive, Public Records Office, 72, vol. 1041, London.

11. Antonio González to Minister of State, No. 287, November 14, 1862, Sp/pol/USA/2407.

12. Savage to Seward, No. 120, February 3, 1864, US/disp/Havana/47.

An important byproduct of the maritime relations between Florida and Cuba was a round of discussions between Union and Spanish diplomats regarding the extent of Cuba's territorial waters, and the interpretation of what limits could be placed on United States claims to control over coastal zones. Spain claimed it controlled a belt six miles wide around Cuba, while the United States only acknowledged a three-mile band. Each relied on international law to develop a series of arguments to support their respective cases. Such legalistic exercises were grounded in practical considerations. For instance, in 1862, with an eye cast on Florida, Secretary of State William H. Seward sought the advice of the Navy Department regarding their preferences on international water rights before opening talks with the Spanish. Seward wanted to know what the Navy Department needed in order to patrol Florida's coastline effectively. Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, argued that a three-mile limit was essential, but he acknowledged privately that Seward might have to accede to Spain's demands for a six-mile limit which would follow the normal international practice of the day.¹³

Discussions continued throughout the war without any resolution. Union ships continued to violate Cuban waters, chasing commercial vessels that left Florida's ports, and stopping others before they could reach Confederate ports. The Spanish sought to curb the Union Navy by having their own naval vessels patrol Cuban waters. They were not successful. There even were instances when Union ships ran blockade runners aground on Cuba's shore, generating diplomatic protests, few results, and additional work for diplomatic historians.

Of more long-term significance than maritime incidents was the issue of slavery and how it impacted relations between Spain and the United States and Cuba and Florida. Slavery ended in Florida with its occupation by Union forces. However, in Cuba, slavery continued until the 1880s. In the weeks immediately following the end of the American Civil War, reports filtered into various Union Army and Spanish colonial offices regarding the export of slaves from the former Confederacy to Cuba.

13. Seward to Gideon Welles, October 10, 1862, US/domestic letters/58; Gideon Welles, *Lincoln and Seward* (New York, 1874), 167-73; Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles*, 3 vols. (New York, 1960), I, 170; Tassara to Minister of State, No. 203, October 13, 1862, Sp/pol/USA/2408.

Throughout 1865 and 1866 persistent reports and rumors about blacks being sent from Florida to Cuba caused officials to worry. Delivery of slaves would violate the laws both of the United States and of Spain, and it would embarrass Cuban colonial officials who were under orders to reduce the slave population on the island. Rumors pointed to Pensacola as being a point from which ex-slaves were being shipped to Cuban plantations. By the spring of 1866, reports of such traffic were so creditable that the State Department and Spain's envoy to Washington, Gabriel Garcia Tassara, discussed the issue and then notified local officials in Florida and Cuba to stop the exportation of blacks. The actual number of former slaves sent to Cuba in the months following the Civil War may never be known; however, it appears that between forty and 200 left Florida for Cuban plantations.¹⁴

A byproduct of these episodes was increased United States pressure on Spain to abolish slavery in Cuba and in Puerto Rico. Spanish officials were extremely sensitive to this American attitude since dissident elements on both islands at that time were advocating independence from Spain, and it was known that within their ranks were many abolitionists. Thus the Spanish always linked United States concerns about slavery to political motives that suggested Washington might want to expand its control over the Caribbean just as it had before the Civil War. Thus the exportation of slaves from Florida was more than just a parochial or humanitarian problem to be solved.

Cuba's revolution which began in the fall of 1868 was the result, in part, of an active abolitionist movement which had some American support. The main thrust of this revolution however, was for political and administrative reforms. It was not predicated on any hope that the United States would support in any major way-although it did mildly-a bid for freedom and the abolition of slavery. The Spanish government proved able to retain its control over the island after many bloody military actions. Most of the rebel leaders fled the island, many emigrating to the United States by way of Mobile, New York, and Pensacola. After the first round of fighting ended at the end of

14. United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers* (Washington, 1867 -), 1866, I, 615-17, 624; Tassara to Pons, May 11, 1866, Charleston Consular Papers.

1868, a number of Cuban rebels passed through Florida en route to the North in search of refuge, money, support, and supplies. Spanish officials tried to keep a close watch on Florida ports, but were not very successful. Pensacola and Tampa operated as ports of entry for Cuban rebels throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century. There were very active Cuban communities in both cities.¹⁵

Thus, in examining the period of the 1850s and 1860s, several conclusions may be drawn about the role Florida played in United States-Cuban relations. Her geographical proximity to Cuba made it necessary for officials in Washington to contain any Spanish military strength in the colony out of fear that Florida might be threatened, as she had been in earlier years. Closely tied to Florida's security, but of more immediate and realistic concern was the need to keep the sea lanes open regardless of any international situation. This task was made more difficult with a hostile government managing Cuba and its excellent ports.

Every captain-general in Havana during this era feared that the United States, or the Confederacy, would use Florida as a base of operations for seizing Havana and the whole island. Each Spanish official assigned to the United States was constantly admonished by Madrid to be wary of Florida's role in Cuban security.¹⁶

During the Civil War, the Confederacy found it possible to trade with Cuba by way of Florida. Cuban officials were reluctant to irritate the Confederacy until they were reasonably sure of the outcome of the conflict—something that was delayed until the battles of 1863 were fought. Thus, they allowed food, clothing, and medicine to come into Pensacola from Havana in exchange for limited supplies of cotton. The colonial government banned the sale of weapons, however, since such exchanges violated the decree of neutrality and international law. It maintained tight control over all Cuban military supplies since they were needed for the military campaign in progress against rebels in Santo

15. An overview of developments in the post-Civil War period is Philip S. Foner, *A History of Cuba and its relations with the United States*, 2 vols. (New York, 1962-63), II.

16. For a detailed example of Spanish concerns see Minister of State to Tassara, December 7, 1856, Sp/correspondencia/USA/1468.

Domingo and to support naval operations against Chile and Peru.

Spain's concerns about Florida's possible role in threatening Cuba's security remained alive for decades and was not limited to the period of the Civil War or to the late 1890s. For example, on December 11, 1889, Florida Senator Wilkinson Call spoke in the Senate suggesting that the government "institute negotiations for the independence of Cuba," recommending its purchase from Spain. Spanish officials once again noted the "Florida problem" and its threat to Cuba. Emilio de Muruaga, Spanish envoy to the United States, informed the foreign minister that Call's proposal had wide popular backing in the United States, particularly in Florida, where there were economic ties to the island's cattle ranches and orange groves.¹⁷ And, as in the 1850s, Spanish officials in Havana reported that rebels were being outfitted in Florida before landing on the island. Officials in Madrid followed the example of authorities of earlier decades by instructing their envoy in Washington to protest these activities.¹⁸

Florida throughout the nineteenth century contributed to the tradition of rivalry and conflict between Spain and the United States. Florida irritated these contacts and insured the continuation of an agitated state of affairs amongst Spain, the United States, and Cuba regarding the influence of European and American governments in the Caribbean. If the events of the 1890s leading directly to the Spanish-American War of 1898 seem more dramatic and popular to study, those of an earlier year are also. The pattern of behavior established before and during the Civil War contributed to the final removal of Spain from the Caribbean by the beginning of the twentieth century.

17. Congressional Record, Senate, 51st cong., 51st sess., xxi, Part I, 143; Emilio de Muruaga to Minister of State, December 14, 1889, Sp/pol/USA/2414; New York *Las Novedades*, December 12, 13, 14, 1889 clippings, *ibid*.

18. (Unreadable) to Minister of State, January 8, 1893, Sp/pol/USA/2414; Unsigned to Minister of the Colonies, February 9, 1893, *ibid*.